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POWDER RIVER-LET 'ER ROAR!
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H-H-HE MADE ME CALL, DOCTOR!
GET BUSY ON THIS SHOULDER, DOC. ONE FUNNY MOVE AND THE GIRL GETS IT
O-O-OW!
I'VE GOT HIM. CALL THE POLICE!
HE WAS HIT IN A DOWNTOWN HOLDUP LAST NIGHT, BUT GOT AWAY
WHEW! I THOUGHT I'D LEFT ALL THIS IN THE ARMY
I'M DUE AT THE HOSPITAL IN AN HOUR, I MUST HURRY HOME AND CLEAN UP
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I LIKE YOUR BLADE, SIR. I'VE NEVER ENJOYED A MORE REFRESHING SHAVE!
I SWEAR BY THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN AND EASY SHAVING
GOLF? THAT'S MY DISH, BUT I'M NEW HERE AND . . .
YOU MUST LET US SHOW YOU OUR COURSE, DOCTOR
NICE WORK, DAD. HE'S GRAND
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CONTENTS

Two Big, Gripping Western Novels

GET THOSE GUNS TO VILLA!....Harry F. Olmsted 10
Why did Horn and Castro, outcasts of a rebel empire, stagger back, maimed and bleeding, from the torture cellar of the *Metodicos*, to bring rifles and bullets to the guerrilla commander who had condemned them to death?

POWDER RIVER—LET 'ER ROAR!....M. Howard Lane 78
From Matagorda to Powder River rode Clay Marland to vent the sign of his own Slant A—with the Devil's branding iron!

Vigorous Frontier Novelette

PRINT IT IN BLOOD!....Tom W. Blackburn 44
Bill Shaw, pilgrim printer, had a bet with the gun-master of Hell for one deep, dark grave—that cold type was as deadly as hot six-iron lead!

Five Smashing Short Stories

GUNSMOKE IN HIS EYES....Harrison Colt 30
Barroom doors swung a dirge the day Death's deputy double-crossed the wrong man!

THE PISTOL PREACHMENT OF BILDAD SHANE....Gunnison Steele 34
Peace, Bildad's pappy said, is a fine thing, so buy it with the best of broken heads!

I.O.U. ONE LIFE!....Prentice A. Burlingham 58
The Rondo Kid hit Cross Creek to pay a debt—with the gun of a ghost that couldn't rest!

TOO MANY DEPUTIES....Will C. Brown 64
The Pesky pardners were so honest that they'd cold-deck Peter to hang Paul!

KING OF THE SMOKY RIVER....Harold F. Cruickshank 71
The lynx-king, He-Chee, at showdown, gave out wilderness justice that man still uses. . . .

Two New Western Features

THE STRAWBOSS....The Editor 6
When the old-time graybeards licked their men, they stayed licked—and rode herd on them.

THE RIPROARIOUS WEST....Robbins and Farren 8
Ab Yeager of California ran for sheriff in jail—and got elected!

ALL STORIES NEW
NO REPRINTS

NEXT ISSUE
PUBLISHED OCTOBER 25!

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WHAT TO DO IF LOST IN THE WOODS AT NIGHT

Common sense and your flashlight can bring you through, says Adirondack guide Edwin Young, of Star Lake, N. Y.

1 First—take it *easy!* You're never really *lost* until you lose your head! *Don't travel at night.* Instead, use your flashlight to gather boughs and leaves for a bed, near a stream if possible. Build a signal fire; it will warm you and protect you. Then—

2 Flash the S.O.S. signal with your flashlight—three short, three long, three short—to guide searchers. Long-lasting "Eveready" batteries will send *hundreds* of such brilliant, penetrating light signals. Save your strength for daylight. Then—

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3 Stay where you are until help comes. But, if you *must* travel, put out fire, head *downstream* along *any* running water; it will generally lead you to safety. When out of the woods, resolve: To *always* carry matches in a waterproof case, a compass, and an "Eveready" flashlight on *every* outing!

4 When you need a flashlight for emergency use—in the woods, at home, in your car, you *need* it! That's why it's wise not to compromise with anything less than "Eveready" batteries. Their longer life of brighter light has justly made them the *largest-selling flashlight batteries in the world.*

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★ THE STRAWBOSS ★

WE WERE sitting comfortably with our feet on the packing case that passes for a desk in these here parts, reading a story for next month's *New Western Magazine*, when a blob of tobacco juice landed square on the page in front of us. We got to our feet, hands reaching for our holsters, when a voice cut in.

"Now hold on, son," the voice said, "don't be gettin' hasty!"

We turned to see a long, skinny old gent standing before us, his jaw thrust out.

"Well, if it isn't Uncle Bud!" we exclaimed. "What brings you out of the desert, Uncle Bud?"

"I'm j'inin' up," he said. "I heered Uncle Sam's call to arms, an' here I am. Hev you been followin' the doin's in the *Hangmans Gulch Gazette*, Junior?"

"No, Uncle Bud," we said, "Haven't seen a copy around for a long time."

The old gent reached inside his vest, and after going through some miscellaneous items, like chewing tobacco, cartridge shells, an extra bandanna and a copy of *New Western*, he finally found a beat-up copy of the *Hangman's Gulch Gazette*.

Carefully Uncle Bud opened the paper. He studied the headlines, his lips moving as he read. Then: "Here 'tis, Junior," he said, "Right here."

We looked over the end of his finger and found what he was pointing at. "Your country needs you!" the paper said. "Join the U.S. Army!"

"Why, Uncle Bud," we said, "aren't you a mite old for the Army?"

"A man's as old as he feels, Junior, an' I feel as frisky as an unbroke colt in a clover field."

He pranced up and down a moment. "Furthermore, Junior," he said, "if you look down thar at the small printin', it says where they're givin' stripes to men who can qualify for 'em." He hunched down. "Watch this draw, Junior."

Quick as a flash the old geezer had his Colt .45 out, the muzzle stuck in our ribs.

"Now hold on, Uncle Bud," we said. "It takes more than a fast draw to get stripes in the Army these days. Can you type?"

"What's that, Junior?"

"Can you file papers?"

"That I can, Junior. I've had more experience filin' than any six waddies in Death Valley. Why, Junior, the number of claims I've filed—"

"No, Uncle Bud," we said. "Not that kind of filing." We thought a moment. "There must be something you can do. . . . How about cooking?"

"Now thar, Junior, is my specialty. You jus' give me a little ol' dutch oven an'—"

"No, Uncle Bud, no. I'm afraid you won't do as a cook either. The Army hasn't used Dutch ovens in fifty years. I really don't know what you can do that will help."

"Junior, cookin' er filin' er tripin' er tarnation knows what ain't gonna stop me—I'm a-gettin' in the Army. Junior, I aim to get me a Nayzeye!"

"Why, Uncle Bud," we said, "there aren't anymore Nazis left. They're all gone. The war's over."

"Junior, you mean to set thar and tell me that the hull shootin' match is over, without'n me gettin' even one o' these Nazi owlhooters?" There were tears in the old jigger's eyes.

We put our hand on his shoulder. "Uncle Bud," we said, "That's about the size of it."

He turned and looked out the window across the steel spires and stone turrets and glittering, weblike bridges, landmarks so different from the mesas, arroyos and the wide, lonely yet friendly spaces of his own Southwest. He was thinking back to the young days of this young country. To that misty era when Colt revolvers hammered a smoky, stinking, earshattering concerto to the clanging of sledges on railroad spikes.

"Some Injuns," the old man said suddenly, turning away from the window, "were plumb tough critters in the old days. Fightin' folks, they were, a lot of 'em. They'd burn powder until we shot their guts out. Others were right neighborly, or so they looked. But, by God, we licked 'em—and then, by God, we put 'em on reservations and kept a weather eye on 'em!"

The ancient jasper turned and looked out the window again. "That's what you're seemin' to forget, button—that this here fightin' stuff ain't all over. Those thar Nazis are fighters. An' they're still fightin'! They'll fight forever—iffen we don't watch 'em!"

Uncle Bud carefully put his soiled Stetson back on, patted the holster his six-iron rested in reflectively. When he spoke again his voice was soft.

"But if you young 'uns got half the guts yore forefathers had this country of ourn ain't in much danger—even iffen the rustlers yuh just whopped jine up with the bounty-huntin' sons that helped yuh whop 'em. . . .

—THE EDITOR.

I Will Show You How to Learn RADIO by Practicing in Spare Time

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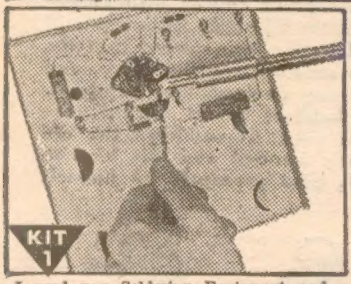
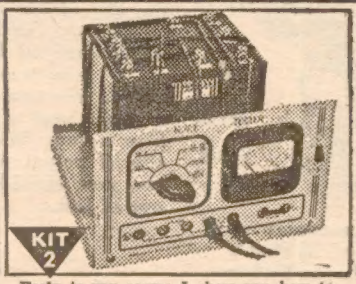
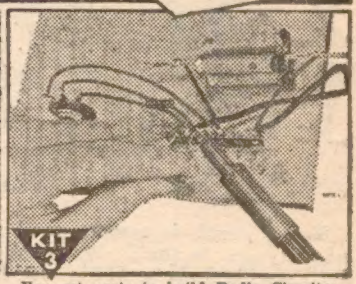


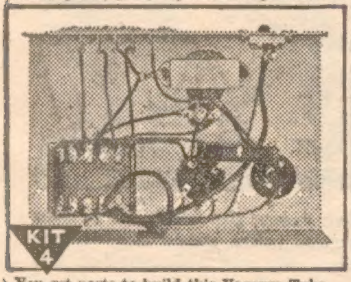
I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



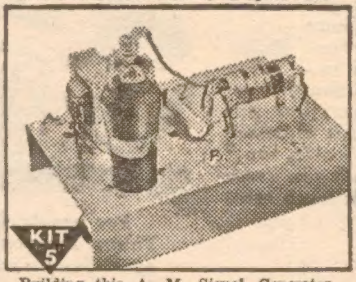
Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



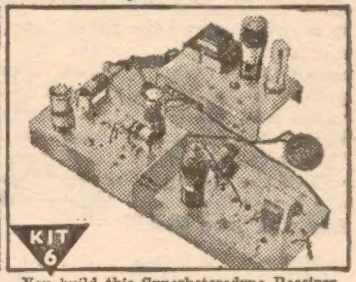
You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



You build this Superheterodyne Receiver which brings in local and distant stations—and gives you more experience to help you win success in Radio.

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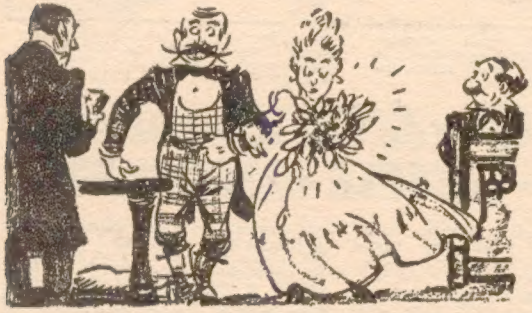
The RIPROARIOUS WEST

By Robbins and Farren

Texas youth is taught good manners at an early age. In the dining room of El Paso's old Priscilla Inn, in 1887, one Texas father gave his son a lesson in table etiquette he never forgot. As the two were punishing a thick steak, a sweat-drenched stranger walked in and compared the Lone Star State unfavorably with another Hot Spot considerably more distant. The impulsive Texas youth gripped his sharp meat knife and made for the stranger, but was halted by a parental hand on his shirttail. "Don't go at thet man with yore knife, son," yelped the outraged father, "Don't you know any better than that? Always stick fresh meat fust with yore fork!"

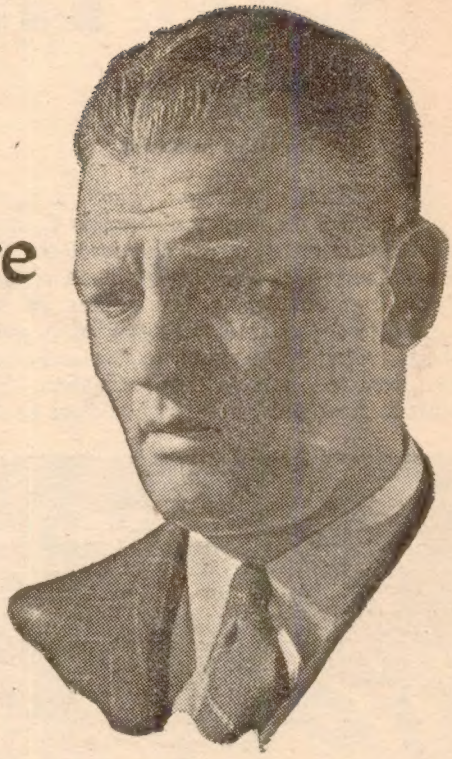


A Chicago cattle buyer blew into Dodge City one night in 1859 and was delighted to hear the rattle of poker chips echoing from the back room of Dudley's Saloon. He intimated that he'd like to get into the game. "I dunno," the barkeep said doubtfully, "They play for mighty high stakes out here." The city slicker laughed. "High stakes, eh?" he chuckled, striding into the game room. He pulled a hundred dollar bill off a roll and threw it on the green baize table, saying, "Let me have chips for all of this!" Solemnly, the dealer took the century note and slowly pushed out one white chip.

When the sheriff of Fire Acres, California, daringly jailed gunslick Ab Yaeger, he thought he had clinched his own re-election. "Single-handedly, I have put this dangerous criminal in the shadow of the noose," was the gist of his campaign speech. But Yaeger was far from through. Although still behind bars, he announced that he, too, was running for the office, and as the election day dawned, his numerous gunmen and a herd of cowed citizens gave him a landslide vote. At sundown the old sheriff reluctantly handed over his keys to the new sheriff, who promptly let himself out of jail.

For nearly five years, the fondness of Jim Fallon for practical jokes made the citizens of Abilene a miserable and unhappy lot. His bruising fists and snarling guns took care of any protests that were registered about exploding cigars, soapsuds in the beer, and the other tricks which this incorrigible loafer spent all his waking hours inventing. Even when he fell in love, he couldn't resist presenting his bride with a beautiful bouquet twined in poison ivy. But the object of his affections had the last laugh. For after the hitching ceremony, Fallon never played another prank—he didn't have time. It took seven days work a week to support his wife and the fourteen in-laws who came with her.

What keeps YOU from making more MONEY?



Just what is the matter—why aren't you making more money? Look around you. Probably many of the people you know are doing a lot better than you are.

What's the reason?

Your own native ability is probably just as good as theirs—probably nothing wrong with your personality and appearance.

But—*they have something you lack.* The fact that they have a better job and more money proves that. Success in business today is measured by the dollar sign.

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GET THOSE GUNS

CHAPTER ONE

Payments in Blood!

A CHILL, blustery wind whipped down the Valley of the Rio Grande, stirring up great clouds of the fine bottomland dust and lifting it in a sun-shrouding pall. The last leaves of fall rustled to the ground to be carried in gusts of sand against the squat adobes and down the deserted streets of somnolent San Mateo. And with them, as bloodless as the sand, as dry and sere as the dead leaves and as if blown on the same wind, a man came to the drab placita.

At first glance he might have seemed only another of the middle-aged cowboys and miners whose endless comings and goings were no longer a matter of comment along the Rio. He was fleshless and stooped. His denims, half boots and Stetson carried the marks of long hard wear. His horse was a run-of-the-mill mustang. The modest roll thonged behind his cantle was suggestive of the saddle tramp. It

Their pistols exploded with a roar, and Estudillo spun backwards.

Smashing Saga of Rebellion Along the Bloody Border

TO VILLA!

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

Along the sandy reaches of the brimstone Border, old-timers still tell of Demery Horn and Juan Castro, outcast *dorados* of Villa's famous legion, who crawled back from a traitor's hell to bring bullets and rifles to the same fighting leader who had condemned them to death!

was only when one looked carefully into the drawn, seamed face, into eyes that were deep sunken and almost colorless, that one knew this was a young man made old by suffering, and grim experience and despair.

Old Pablo, who tended the *Corral de los Caballeros,* was one to so study a man. He had seen them come and go for thirty years and had come to accord each one a classification of courtesy. To him a big cowman, a cattle buyer maybe, or a mining man, these rated being called "coronel." Men of somewhat lesser stature, yet distinctly not of the common herd, he favored with the title "capitan." This one dismounted painfully, gave instructions for the care of his pony in a soft tone of voice and Old Pablo would have answered. *"Si, si, amigo.* It shall be as you wish." But the Spanish of this stranger was fluent and correct, and something in his eyes caused Old Pablo to doff his sombrero and bow. *"Gracias, mi Coronel.* I give it my full attention at once."

"The Southwestern Import and Export Company. Where may it be found, *señor?*"

Old Pablo pointed. "There. . . . beside the drainage ditch. That adobe wall showing through the trees. A great business for our poor town, its owners true caballeros—and very rich."

"So-o-o?" The stranger's eyes burned. "Who owns it?"

"Ah, Coronel, I thought everybody knew. There is Señor Anton Sarg, the unsmiling one, and Señor Fabian Duarte—stern masters who will always have honest servants. And then there is Señor Charles Angel—the timid one. Some day his shadow will jump out at him and scare him to death."

He laughed at his witticism, but the stranger didn't laugh. "Three, eh? Where would a man find them, now that it is after working hours?"

"Ah, Coronel, if it is a place you desire with them, I would wait till morning when the spirit is light. Even then, Señor Sarg is very stern. He lives here at the inn, but he and Señor Duarte are away. The timid one lives in that low, white casa yonder, with his daughter."

"Gracias." The stranger pressed a coin into his palm and Old Pablo caressed it with gnarled fingers, watching the stranger move toward the inn, swaying more than a little as he walked, as though favoring a foot or a leg. The good God forbid that he ever unleash the devils sleeping in his dead eyes, Pablo thought.

The stranger let himself into the hostelry which, if not clean, was at least pleasantly warmed by the fire on the corner hearth and free from the stinging dust. Made welcome by a laughing inn keeper, whose girth suggested a robust appetite, he asked a question and learned that Sarg and Duarte had driven to El Paso and would not return for several days. In the meantime, "—if you will accept of my mean hospitality and make my house your own, Señor?"

"Horn. Demery Horn." He signed the book and followed the waddling inn keeper down a dingy hall and into a stuffy cubicle that had only a bowl and a pitcher of water to lift it out of squalor. The rawhide bed sagged and the husk tick gave the threadbare blankets a warty look.

When the inn keeper had retreated, Demery poured a bowl of water and washed himself with all the relish of a cleanly man well stained with travel. Having toweled himself, he rolled and lit a cigarette and went to the lobby where the stove burned merrily and where another guest was marking his name in the book.

This man, patently of Mexican extraction, was small, swart and misshapen. One shoulder hung low and the fingers which held the pen were gnarled and crooked. One foot, in its slit boot, toed in grotesquely and he carried all his weight upon the other. His eyes, like burning black coals, lifted as Demery passed. For one fleeting instant their glances met and locked. Demery made no sign. On the pinched face of the other was a sudden revealing grimace and he half turned his head to watch Demery pass from the inn and limp from sight, braced against the gale.

"That," volunteered the garrulous inn keeper, "is Señor Demery Horn. You know him, Señor—" he glanced at the book, "Señor Castro?"

The crippled little man gave a mirthless chuckle. "Like me," he equivocated, "he is a *cojo*—a cripple. Such men have more than passing interest for me."

OVER on another street, Demery Horn was opening a gate in the high adobe wall, behind which sat the low, white house with the red-tiled roof. The gate clanged behind him and his eyes were busy as he moved along a flagged walk lined with aged rose bushes which had grown together and were covered with fragrant blooms. The wind was deflected from this quiet spot and Demery smiled a half-regretful smile. Kind of a shame, he was thinking, to bring storm to so peaceful a garden.

There was a knocker on the massive door and Demery used it. A servant appeared. "Si, señor?"

"I wish to speak with Mister Angel."

"Don Carlos is at supper. I am sorry, señor, but he will see nobody."

"He'll see me, I think." Demery would have pushed past the servant, but the fellow grappled with him, barring the way savagely.

"No, he will see nobody. You must not come in, señor, or—"

"Take your hands off me!" The searing flame of his eyes caused the servant to un-

hand him and recoil. Demery stepped inside. "Now lead me to your master."

The sound of their voices had reached the dining room. A woman came into the hall, hurrying toward them. "What is it, Rodrigo? Who is this man?"

"I am Don Cuerno, Miss," said Demery. "Tell Mister Angel that Don Cuerno is here to see him."

She stood there looking at him with haughty disapproval. Rodrigo, relieved of the responsibility, retired. The girl said: "Don Cuerno? You do not seem to be Mexican. Why should my father see you? Is it important?"

"Ask him," said Demery, his pale eyes seeming to look through her without seeing her. Yet he did see her and knew she was very white and very shapely and very pretty. "Yes, miss, ask your father if it's important."

She stared at him, puzzled, a little frightened by some mystery she sensed in him. From the dining room came the voice of a man. "What keeps you, Esther? Your supper gets cold. What is it?"

"It's a man, father. A Don Cuerno who has stepped inside and says he must see you. . . ."

"Don Cuer—" The gasp choked off and for a moment there was absolute silence. Then a chair scraped back; a step sounded and a man came into the hall. He was short, baldish and inclined toward fatness. His freshly shaven jowls were pink and shiny as a new boot. He looked like a man to whom a smile came easy, but he was not smiling now as he inched toward Demery like a body magnetized and drawn against its will. His round and very prominent eyes were fixed upon his visitor and his mouth hung open. His breathing was swiftly protesting as he murmured, "Don Cuerno."

"A small world, isn't it, Angel?" Demery stood stiffly, a terrible indictment in his sunken eyes, his lips tight and hard and cruel, watching the color fade from this well-fed man. "A small world."

Angel got out a silken handkerchief and mopped his face. "We—I thought you had died, Horn," he managed, and seemed to have forgotten the girl who glanced from one to the other and was suddenly afraid of the unspoken things between these men. "We heard you had died."

"I can understand that, Angel. Even better, I can understand why you believed it. We believe what we want to believe, my friend, but I can assure you I am very much alive."

"Alive—er—yes. And in San Mateo. What brings you here?"

"Ask yourself, Charles Angel."

"Money?"

"I'm pretty broke, Angel. I doctored a long time before I got my health back, and a man must eat. No, I'm not begging."

"Then what—?" Charles Angel was bluffing, and it is hard to bluff when one knows his opponent has read his cards. "Surely, you're not thinking of—"

"That's exactly what I am thinking of, Angel. Maybe I'm crazy. Maybe what I went through cracked my mind. But I'm not so crazy that I've forgotten that the greatest patriot Mexico has ever known has trusted me; that thanks to you and your partners, I let him down. I've hunted you, Angel, and I've found you and I'm demanding what you stole from me—every red cent of it. That is all I demand—unless of course you refuse me."

The girl shivered. Charles Angel shifted on his feet and licked his ashen lips. "I . . . I understand your feelings, Horn," he murmured. "But you too must understand our side of it. We were dealing with revolution, war. You were fighting for Pancho Villa, whom we considered no more than a bandit. We . . . we were fighting for law and order and all the American investors, little and big, whose interests were and still are menaced by that damnable brigand."

It was a strong speech and it was Charles Angel's case and Don Cuerno smiled a thin smile. "You mean to tell me you fought?"

"In the only way men of our age can be expected to fight. . . ."

"As a buzzard fights, Angel. Around the edge of the carnage, taking blood-stained money from the dead, using it to pay spies who betray men such as me to the torture chambers of the *Metodicos*."

Angel closed his eyes, remembering. "If we argued a hundred years, Horn, we could not see it eye to eye. Someone had to get hurt. It happened to be you. Maybe we owe you something; yes, I'll say we owe you plenty. We've got it. We've done well here and across the line. You'll get

money and lots of it. You'll never have to worry about anything again. . . ."

Don Cuerno's laugh halted him. "Never have to worry." It was a bitter laugh and he took all weight from his twisted leg and painfully wiggled it. "Never have to worry, he says."

"Please." A sob broke from the girl who was momentarily growing more terrified.

Don Cuerno turned his filmed eyes on her, as if seeing her for the first time. "Forgive me," he murmured, and moved to leave. At the door he turned his glance back at Angel. "I'll be at the inn. Take this up with your partners when they return from the border. Tell them they must decide quickly, one way or the other. I must have full value for all you took from me. In gold . . . or in something quite as valuable to you. Good evening."

He was gone into the chill, blustery twilight and wind seemed fairly to shake the solid adobe house. Charles Angel stared at the door that had slammed behind his visitor, still licking his lips, his mild blue eyes full of terror. Esther came to his side and took his arm and said, "Don't, father. Please don't look like that."

For moments he seemed unaware of her. Then his arm went around her and he pulled her close. He spoke very softly, almost in a whisper. "I'm afraid your father is in trouble, honey. Very serious trouble."

BLOWN by the wind that swept the main street of San Mateo, Demery Horn returned to the inn, went to the stove and stood there warming his hands. Behind his short counter, the talkative inn keeper beamed upon him. "My guest who signed the book as you went out, señor—he is interested in meeting you."

"So-o-o?"

"Yes. He is in the room next to yours, farther down the hall. He said if you had nothing better to do this evening to come in and talk. He is lonely."

"I'll look in on him," said Demery, absently, but he didn't move from the comfort of the stove. Standing there, he was only vaguely aware of the inn keeper's small talk of local people and local things. He was thinking of Juan Castro, the young Mexican hidalgo, who in his own way was keeping their rendezvous—Juan, who had answered the call of his soul, cast away the emoluments of a rich and powerful family, lifted his voice bravely in the cry "land and liberty" and ridden to share the danger, the glory and the grim and arduous agonies of the "peoples' campaign" which placed an idealistic dreamer in the presidency.

Demery's mind turned backward, recalling the revulsion of spirit that had plunged him, full hearted, into the campaign. His own father, Yancey Horn, had long been manager of the *Mina de las Aguiles,* down Guanacevi way. Demery had not been born at the mine, but the next thing to it. He had come to speak Spanish better than English. He grew up welcome at the haciendas of the great rancheros and in the hovels of the *peons,* the *medieros* and the *charros.*

That very friendliness was to react bitterly against him, when weighed by the uniformed rural police of the tyrant.

It was the year of the great drouth, when the corn crop failed and there was nothing for the already pinched bellies of the peons. Crazed by hunger, maddened at the sight of countless cattle and storage granaries bulging with corn, all denied them, the peons rose against the Rancho Gogojito, overpowered the armed guards of the *mayordomo* and broke the granary locks. That night there was much steer blood spilled and feasting under the moon.

The soldiers of the Guardia Rural came, bringing fear and a warning from the *presidente.* "Next time," read the order, "one out of three men will be lined up and shot." It was no idle threat and the peons know it. But the orders of empty stomachs have a power all their own. Incited by their relatives at the Mine of the Eagles, the peons revolted again, this time hanging the cruel *mayordomo* at the rancho gate.

Again the rurales came, this time to carry out the grim injunction. The hills behind Gogojito resounded to the echoes of gunfire. Ragged men were toppled into the graves they had dug with their own hands. And in the adobes the wails of grieving women and children rose to Heaven. Because the miners of Yancey Horn were involved one out of each three of them was chosen and executed. When the manager of *La Mina de las Aguiles* dared to protest the judgment, he was shot in the stomach by an arrogant captain of

rurales. Forty-eight hours later he died in Demery's arms, and the *"tierra y libertad"* —land and liberty—of Pancho Villa was waking the sleeping spirit of the peons.

Demery had known Pancho when he was Doroteo Aranga, a small urchin in Guanacevi, with a temper to match his fiery red hair, with muscles and chest that impelled him toward greater things than peonage. He had known Pancho when he was the greatest tamer of wicked broncos in Northern Mexico. He had known him when his tally of rurales had run into the hundreds, when his banditry and rustling to fill the bellies of peons and *medieros* became the themes of a hundred *corridos*—sagas to be strummed on a thousand guitars, to be sung by a thousand ragged minstrels.

So the five hundred mules of the Mine of the Eagles were delivered by Demery to Villa's Army of the North, together with three priceless machine guns, a hundred Winchester .44-40 rifles and one hundred thousand rounds of ammunition. Not to mention Demery himself, burning to avenge his father with his mastery of the machine gun, and a hundred rough, tough paisanos, hardened in the mine and filled with the black memory of their kinsmen rotting in plowed-over graves at Gogojito.

The new army formed, gathered strength by the hour and tried its physique in a tragic test at Casa Grandes, failing miserably. Demery missed that action, being with Villa in a patrol toward Conchos. After that, the man on horseback, whom they were already calling the Christ-fool, was willing to listen to the one who had been variously Doroteo Aranga, the Puma of the Sierras and now Pancho Villa. An assault was ordered against Ciudad Juarez and the battle was lost to the revolutionaries until Villa, in *un golpe terrifico*—one terrific gulp—turned the tide with Demery's machine gun corps, with his deadly machete men and his dynamite grenadiers, made up of miners from the Mine of the Eagles.

These were the pictures flashing through Demery's mind as he warmed himself at the inn keeper's stove. He thought back, warmed again by Pancho Villa's growing regard for him—an affection compounded of the chieftain's love for Yancey Horn, of his admiration for one who would desert wealth and luxury for the cause of Mexico's peons, and of Demery's growing worth as leader of the army's machine gun units.

He recalled the almost gay march southward to Chihuahua City, on the way to the capital, already abandoned by the decrepit tyrant, never dreaming that he was not fated to enter triumphantly into Mexico City with his chieftain.

There was looting in Chihuahua, where Pancho Villa made an example of those who plundered against his orders. Standing spread-legged before a drunken, mutinous mob, he killed seven of the leaders with his two deadly six-shooters, cowed the rest and seized their spoils. These, together with gold demanded of the town, were packed and given into the keeping of Demery Horn and one *Teniente*—Lieutenant—Roman Estudilla, to be taken to the border and given over to certain secret parties in exchange for American machine guns and ammunition. Taken with them, to cook their meals and care for their horses, was one who secretly handled Villa's problems of intelligence—quiet, proud but humble Juan Castro, who had never done a menial task in his life until he renounced his heritage and joined Villa.

DEMERY could smile, thinking back to that careful ride borderward with the treasure. His growing friendship with the taciturn young hidalgo, their talks of opera for the peons, for the opportunity under *La Republica de los Indios* of restoring the lost educational program fostered by Benito Juarez, the liberator, and buried by a cruel dictator and tyrant. And Estudillo, he of the patrician name, whose name was really that of a peon father, sitting aloof from them, smiling scornfully at their prattle, openly contemptuous of their superior breeding.

In Juarez, Demery and Juan were betrayed by Estudillo, but were warned by a friendly peon who had overheard the man selling them out. There was time for them to lift the treasure from its resting place in a sandy bank of the Rio Grande and secret it elsewhere. That night they were awakened, in their hotel room in El Paso, taken with guns in their backs to a large house reserved for the *Metodicos*. There they met three estimable gentlemen who engaged in risky border games to their great profit, Charles Angel, Fabian Duarte and Anton Sarg.

Here too Demery and Juan were given the option of telling what they had done with the treasure of Pancho Villa and taking one tenth as their share, or in telling where it was and receiving nothing. Which of course was no choice at all for men fired with loyalty for Villa.

In a cellar, dimly lighted with flickering candles and admirably equipped with engines that might have been relics of the Spanish Inquisition, they were subjected to the rack and the screw, the gouge and the gimlet. Estudilla, the Judas, stood in the shadows smiling thinly behind his spike mustache, with Angel pale and licking his lips; Duarte rubbing his great hands together raspingly, gloating over the roared cursing of Demery Horn, whose body broke but never his spirit; and Sarg, icy, inflexible Sarg, whose gaunt mask of a face showed no twinge of emotion throughout those terrible hours, whether under the lashing curses of tortured men or after Juan broke completely and revealed what he knew.

Demery's teeth gritted as he recalled the laughter of those men, of the bludgeoning, of his pain-filled awakening in the hands of the police and the weary, discouraging days waiting in the hospital for his broken body to heal. His mind was filled with his oft repeated promise that someone would pay for his suffering—in blood.

But in youth the will toward vengeance is a fleeting spark. And his impatience gave way to resignation as great news came from Mexico. The revolution was won. Madero was president and already taking steps to divide the great ranchos and to restore the dignity of the peons. Pancho Villa had retired from the army and was in Chihuahua City, operating a string of modern butcher shops and abattoirs. The need now for machine guns seemed very far away.

The day came when Demery was discharged with a limp he would carry to his grave. He obtained employment with an El Paso contractor who, some years before, had installed a stamp mill at *La Mina de los Aguiles*. During the six months he worked as a timekeeper on an irrigation project upriver, he heard nothing of Juan Castro, nor whether he had lived or died. Then came the letter.

One night a voice spoke his name, outside his tent. He admitted a ragged Mexican who handed him a purse well filled with gold and a letter from Castro. Though long ill in the home of a friend in Ciudad Juarez, Juan had not been content to let sleeping dogs lie. He had learned, he said, that Angel and Duarte and Sarg were operating out of an upriver town called San Mateo, still playing their sly games, using their ill-gotten gains to nourish the tentacles of a growing counter revolution. Villa, convinced those he trusted had betrayed him, had put a sentence of death upon both Demery and Juan, and it still stood. Material evidence, Juan stated, must be obtained if they were to restore Pancho's faith in them. He would, he said, meet Demery at the inn at San Mateo, the evening of the nineteenth, if indeed Demery cared again to meet him.

This was the nineteenth and Juan awaited his coming. A Juan so thin and drawn and twisted Demery doubted if he would have recognized his friend had he met him face to face. Demery stirred, straightened his shoulders and stepped into the gloomy hallway.

CHAPTER TWO

Gold or Guns

THEY stood in that dim candle light, hands clasped, eyes searching—Demery for outward scars, Juan for any sign of condemnation in the mind of his friend.

"I should have told you, Don Cuerno, not to appear too freely on these streets. These three demons must not make an end to either of us before we kill them."

Demery smiled. "We look at this differently, amigo. What does it merit us to kill them? Does it restore Pancho's faith in us? No. I have already gone in search of them. Duarte and Sarg are in El Paso. I called upon Angel. He was like he was in the cellar that night—scared to death. Remember?"

"Can I forget anything of that sad night?" whispered Juan. "Never. Nothing. Least of all that I was a coward, that I weakened and betrayed the cause."

"Nonsense." Demery's arm went around him. "I've seen too much of you to ever believe you're a coward. A man can only stand so much."

"What did you tell Angel, amigo?"

"That I was here to collect. Every damned cent."

"What did he say to that?"

"He wanted to pay me off—about such a deal as they offered that night in Paso. I think I made it clear it must be all or nothing. Left to him, I'm pretty sure we'll get it all back. But of Duarte and Sarg I'm not so sure."

"They will die first," said Juan, in a rasp of vocal cords ruined by prolonged screaming. "And I shall be happy to accommodate them." His deformed hand folded around the haft of a knife in his sash and a fiery fanaticism lit his eyes. This and a gauntness of face that accentuated the prominence of his Latin nose and the long black hair that brushed his shoulders hiding what they had done to his ears—these things changed his looks, as if suffering had burned out his Castilian blood, leaving only the Indian.

Demery didn't rebuke him, only reached down and unlocked the twisted fingers and held them until the fires in the black eyes cooled. Only then did doubt beset him. How could he play his cards with devils like Duarte and Sarg? His cards were deuces and the only bluff he had was the thing Juan was thinking of now—death. Would it mean killing those three and then fading across the border with nothing to disprove the unjust charges against them?

Demery hoped not, for Juan's sake. That night, before Chihuahua, Villa had stared into the campfire and had told Juan that once the revolution was won, he would see to it personally that his kinsmen, who had thrown their considerable support to the *Metodicos,* would be stripped of position, and that he, Juan, would be made head of the Castro family and its vast holdings—ranchos, banks and mercantile establishments. Fate and a Judas and the torture room had blocked that.

"Patience, my friend," Demery cautioned. "Always we must be ready to kill, but our weapons must not be drawn until we have exhausted our last chance at vindication. Now let us relax and talk. There is nothing else for us to do until Duarte and Sarg return from Paso."

The next day was quiet—too quiet, had one taken the trouble to analyze it. The wind, as if wearied, fell asleep and there was no breath of air stirring. Men and fowls and the village curs respected the hush. Troubled by a sense of some pending cosmic upheaval, knowing no salve for their long pent up impatience, Demery and Juan hung about the inn with nothing to do but think. Even the prattle of the garrulous inn keeper would have helped, but the man was studiously silent, occasionally leaving his counter to take a short walk about the town.

Along about mid-afternoon, Demery heard the first sibilance of the whisper running like a flame through San Mateo. It brought him onto his feet, hands and teeth clenched as he fought to throttle a yell. He hurried to Juan's room, woke him from his siesta. "Juan! Wake up! They are saying there is another revolution against Madero!"

"Revolution? Madero?" Juan sat up, staring, slow to cast off sleep. Then, as the intelligence sank home and its virus sent blood leaping along his veins, he bounded from the bed, fighting to pull on his boots and strap on his shoulder gun-harness at the same time. "Revolution . . . *por Dios!* Who strikes, amigo? The Metodicos?"

"They say it is Orozco—that starved wolf who was ever jealous of Pancho's hold on the peons. That stiff-necked storekeeper from Sanchez. And Huerta, and, according to rumor, Zapata—the professional revolutionary, though I cannot see why unless he has abandoned the people. But it is all rumor—maybe untrue."

Juan got his fire-scarred feet into his boots, straightened and went into a weird Indian caper. His face was convulsed with a joy that transcended his long-nursed bitterness, his will for vengeance, the agony of wounds that would never heal. In his harsh frog croak, he sang a bar of that rondelay that had sprung, verse by verse, from the creak of saddle leather, the thudding of hoofs, the bawdy joy of warriors on the march, the shrill laughter of soldiers:

"Success to the revolution!
Success to the good plan of action. . . ."

"Stop it!" The order fell from Demery's lips like the shot of a gun. His face was dark with sudden anger and, when Juan straightened and stared at him, he added,

"It is said that Don Francisco is dead!"

"Dead?" It stunned Juan, just as it had stunned and was stunning every one who had come under the influence of that benign and noble spirit.

"Then this is a revolution of the politicos?"

Demery nodded. "The politicos, backed by the Metodicos."

"And Don Pancho?"

Demery shrugged. "Who knows? He loved Madero. If they have not killed him too, the roar of the Puma will echo again throughout the Sierra Madre. You know what this means to us?"

"We must go, compañero . . . now."

"No. We must put all thought of revenge behind us. We must make very sure that Angel and Duarte and Sarg are made to return the treasure—to the last dollar."

"Si, si." Juan sighed, nodding studiously. "You are right . . . as always. But *Dios* grant those devils return quickly from Paso. Dan Pancho will be needing money."

A GROUND-SHAKING rumble woke Demery at dawn, next morning. He dressed quickly and popped into the dark hallway, colliding with Juan. Together they went to the street, to join the inn keeper and a number of guests. San Mateo stood outside its doors, watching an army pour through. Troops of cavalry, with their horse-drawn field pieces. Company after company of khaki-clad infantry, weary and dusty on the forced march. A long procession of motor trucks, piled high with munitions and supplies. It was the Army of the United States, marching toward the border on the ancient highway between Sante Fe and Paso del Norte.

"*Madre de Dios,*" breathed the inn keeper. "Is it war with Mexico?"

That was the question uppermost in the mind of every watcher. Demery worried over it. He knew the pressure the American government had put upon Madero and his ragtag Peoples' Army. Had this new revolt been fomented north of the line? If so, there was small chance of combating it.

At ten, the last unit of the armed force had passed to the south. And then came papers from Paso, with three-inch scare headlines. President Madero and Vice President Suarez were slain! Huerta, in command of the Government forces, had seized the arsenal! Mexico City was devastated by an artillery duel! The *Republica de los Indios* had fallen! Mexico was being combed for Pancho Villa! The United States Army had moved to enforce neutrality!

It was crushing news for Demery and Juan. With no appetite for breakfast, they retired to Demery's room to talk it over. And when they were seated, they were mute. What was there to be said in the face of such a catastrophe?

While they sat there staring at one another, there was a knock at the door. It was Charles Angel. He was highly nervous, white about the lips, as he took a seat upon the bed. "Isn't this something?" he asked, and then, with nerves giving way: "Where in God's name are Duarte and Sarg? You'd think at a time like this they'd burn up their automobile getting back here."

"Maybe they did," said Demery, drily. "Or maybe their past caught up with them in Paso." He pointed to the newspaper. "It says here that government agents are alert and active all along the border. You know what that means."

Angel's eyes writhed and he chewed his mustache. "I've been afraid of that all along. We've been crowding our luck too far. Yes, that's probably it; they're in jail and the next I know, they'll be down here checking our warehouse. If that happens. . . ."

Grim humor touched Demery. "Surely, you didn't come to us for sympathy, Angel."

The man stood up, showing a flash of temper. "I came here, after two sleepless nights, to right a great wrong I was party to. Believe me, gentlemen, when I tell you it was a horror to me that night and has been ever since. But I was powerless. Live and let live—that's my motto, but Duarte and Sarg—"

"We know all about them," broke in Juan, sourly. "What is it you would come at, señor?"

Angel looked at Demery. "You have demanded full value for what we took from you. Do you know what that value is?"

"Enough to trip you if you lie," said Demery.

"It will be in our books; I think I know where I can find it." He sighed. "I tell

you, it will be a load off my conscience when I've paid you in full, with five thousand apiece for the pain you suffered at our hands — poor enough payment, I'll confess."

"This payment," said Demery, unable to credit what he was hearing. "Is it to be in cash?"

"U.S. currency, large denomination bills. We've got a safe bulging with money we dared not bank for fear of attracting Federal attention to our activities." He fell silent, thinking. Then, suddenly, a near smile twisted his lips and he drove his fists into his palm. "By George! What are you going to do with this money, Horn?"

"It's none of your business, Angel. But, for what good the information will do you, we're returning it to the man to whom it belongs."

"Villa!" Angel's eyes burned. "With this new upflare, would he be interested in machine guns? Thirty calibre ammunition? Grenades?"

The man was leaning forward, his eyes hotly eager, his breath coming fast. And

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Demery knew, just as well as if Angel had confessed it, that fear had dictated the inquiry, just as fear dominated Angel's every act. And before he answered, or tried to answer, for in reality he could not be sure, he let his mind stray southward for a glance at Don Pancho.

Angel's face faded from his vision. Juan's low husked, "There is no doubt about it. Don Pancho will be interested," went unheard. Demery saw Villa—two Villas. One blending with the brown earth that had whelped him—his great form stiff, his puma voice stilled forever. He saw another Pancho, puzzled by the weakness of politicos he had been forced to trust, pitifully bewildered by the assassination of his idol, looking this way and that for the means to strike back, crying out in his distress all the old names, sending them forth with the old rallying cry: *"Tierra y Libertad!"*

The vision faded. There was Angel, gasping, "Well, man? What do you say? I can give you a deal here, if you'll remove the stuff from our warehouse right away—now, tonight. How about it?"

Demery smiled. "Let's make it cash," he said, slowly. "I think I'd like to have you on the hot seat, like Juan and I were, that night in Paso. Let's go over and look at the books and then make some room in your safe. Lead out."

A LIGHT burned in the great adobe warehouse among the poplars. The office was a small room, board-partitioned from the great area of the warehouse proper. Through the cracks of that partition seeped the musty smells of cotton, baled alfalfa, sacked oats, barley and wheat, bags of sugar from Las Mochis, textiles from Puebla and bottled spirits, in aromatic packing, from Jalisco. These smells, Demery knew, were as false as the men who were responsible for them. Behind the front of bales and sacks, boxes and crates, were hidden the tools of death—the real business of Southwestern Export and Import Company, Inc.

Demery sat watching Charles Angel thumb through a book of accounts, jotting down figures as Angel called them off. Juan sat slumped in a chair, watching with a vacant stare as if this were something only to be lived through. He seemed to be listening for something.

Now Angel called off a figure and slammed the book shut. "That's it, Horn. Total it and you've got the sum we realized on the gold and jewels. Add ten thousand for yourselves and that is what I'll pay you."

Demery nodded and the room grew very quiet as he added. Now his head came up and he said: "Ninety-three thousand, five hundred and forty-four dollars and ninety-six cents. Plus the ten thousand."

Juan drew in a long breath. Angel asked, "That about what you had in mind?"

"We were to receive an arms credit of seventy-five thousand. The account is satisfactory with me. How about you, Juan?"

" 'Sta bueno. Good."

Angel pressed the tips of his fingers together under his chin, looking at them. "That is less than one hundred and five thousand. You can have that in cash or approximately twice that in arms. Outside are five motor trucks, loaded and tarped and ready to roll. They contain, under what appears to be innocent sacked barley, one hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of machine guns and ammunition, pistols, rifles and grenades. The trucks and the grain will easily raise the value to two hundred thousand."

A fever of eagerness touched him and Demery sensed how the man had suffered as the army passed through, lest the loaded contraband be discovered. The offer tempted him, just as the thought of running it southward repelled him. He shook his head. "You keep the contraband, Angel. We'll take the money."

Angel got up and it seemed as though years had fallen upon his shoulders in a matter of seconds. It was plain he had left the danger end of this business to his partners, whom he now considered out of the picture. Saddled now with something he dared not move and dared not keep, something he felt wholly at a loss to dispose of, he was prey to new terrors. He drew out his keys. "Wait here," he said. "I'll go to the vault."

He moved toward the door leading into the gloomy warehouse. Some sound beyond the panel drew him up short. Juan too heard it and came bouncing out of his chair, his hand streaking beneath the left arm of his jacket. Somewhere a key flung back the bolt of a lock. A door closed

softly. Angel had gone very white. "What's that?" he croaked. "Who's out there?"

The three men held their breaths as they listened. Light footsteps neared. There was a light rap on the panel. "Father!"

"It's Esther!" said Angel, and a great sigh of relief went out of him and the color came flooding back to his face.

The girl came in, tall and slender and cool, closing the door deliberately behind her. Her courageous hazel eyes went from one to the other, coming to rest at last upon Angel. "Dad," she said, and only then was the tension in her apparent. "Duarte and Sarg are here!"

"No," said Angel, and it was a protest. "Where?"

"They came to the house to find you. I told them I hadn't the slightest idea where you were, which was the truth. They went to supper and I hurried here, thinking maybe . . . oh, I'm so glad I've found you. They must not find you with these—these men." Her eyes lit on Demery and there was a plea in them, a plea for mercy and cooperation.

"They . . . they know about Horn being here, Esther?" asked Angel, chokingly.

"Yes. They learned it at the inn. Before he left, Sarg said Horn and Castro must both be killed, not coddled."

Demery and Juan swapped glances. Both laughed, not pretty sounds in that stillness. Angel bridled. "I'll have no part of that, you hear me? I'll not stand for it. We'll only be compounding our crime if we even think it. These men suffered at our hands, and whatever we are in a business way is due largely to what we stripped from them. We've got the money and we're paying them off. And if Sarg defeats me on that, he'll do it over my dead body."

"And ours," said Demery, quietly. "If it's a fight those two want, they can buy it cheap, and get an even break for their money, which is more than they give anybody else. Don't worry about them, Angel. Send for them. The sooner we can thrash this out, the better it suits us."

He looked at Esther and she was smiling at him, her eyes wide with gratefulness. "Thank you, Mister Horn," she murmured. "But don't underestimate them."

"I never underestimate any man, miss."

"My father," she said, "has done some things he's ashamed of. But he is penitent and wants to make it right. Duarte and Sarg will never hear of it, you may be sure. Dad has been powerless against them, just the same as you were powerless, the night he told me about, in El Paso. I . . . I hope when the answer to all this is written, you will remember that."

Demery didn't answer. His sharp ears had picked up a low rumble of voices and his attitude of listening brought silence to the rest. The voices grew in volume. Bootsteps crunching gravel on the roadway leading to the warehouse. Angel caught his breath and looked wildly at Demery and Juan. "It's them! They . . . they mustn't find you here with me." He caught up the account book he had brought from the vault, tossed it behind his roll-top desk. "Esther, take them into the warehouse and hide them until Fabian and Tony get in here, then lead them out—but quietly."

"Forget it," grinned Demery. "You misunderstood me. I want to meet these men. I came here to meet and settle with them."

"But not now, Horn, not now." Angel was trying to push them toward the door. "Later, I'll arrange the meeting. But not here, not now." Now he was utterly a creature of terror. Demery was at the point of refusing point-blank, but Esther stepped up to him. She took his hand and looked into his eyes.

"Please, Demery Horn," she begged. "Give him a little time to work it out. I have an idea you'll hear a lot more that interests you if they meet here with father. They've been to El Paso on something connected with this new Mexican revolution. What you hear might be the means of saving dad, in case of trouble with the government. Please!" She drew him toward the door and Demery didn't resist. She had raised a point he hadn't considered, a point that affected his future, and Juan's, perhaps more than it did Charles Angel's.

"Come on, Juan," he ordered, and the three of them left the office, leaving behind them a shaken and frightened partner in Southwestern Export and Import. Moments later, wedged between cotton bales and the partition, his eye glued to a crack, Demery stood with Esther on one side and Juan on the other. The girl had not released her firm, trusting grip on his hand. Somehow it was comforting.

CHAPTER THREE

Death to the Ambushers!

THE two men who stalked into the office drew a low hiss from Juan, there in the blackness. Both were tall, Fabian Duarte, double-chinned and fat-bellied, and Anton Sarg, bony, cadaverous of face, with cruel lips and eyes chill as daggers of ice. Charles Angel quailed before them and there was a quaver in his voice as he said:

"Well! When you didn't get back, I thought for sure they had picked you up."

Sarg walked up to him, bending until his axe-blade face was no more than a foot from Angel's. "Horn and Castro are here in San Mateo. Where are they now?"

A flash of temper colored Angel's weak face. "What am I now?" he demanded. "A sleuth? You not only leave me here, sitting on a powder keg, expecting me to keep this mad gamble going while American soldiers swarm through the town, but now you look to me to shadow our enemies. What do you think I am? How do I know where they are?"

"You've talked with them?"

"I've listened, if you know what I mean."

"Humph! We must have busted the spirit of that pair, as well as their stubborn carcasses. If I was them, I'd have come shooting. What did they want?"

"Money. Every cent we took."

Sarg cackled. Duarte loosed a full-bellied laugh that boomed hollowly through the warehouse. "Ha, ha, ho, ho, ho! You gave it to them, of course, Señor Angel?"

Behind the partition, Juan's whisper was loaded with hate. "The foul swine!"

"Silencio!" breathed Demery.

In the office, Sarg controlled his mirth. "A fat chance they've got. It's lead not gold they'll get."

"That's a mistake," countered Angel, doggedly. "They do not want it for themselves, but for Villa, who thinks they betrayed him. We owe them that much, Sarg. The money we took from them had much to do with our present prosperity. We can well afford to do the right thing by them."

Duarte had sobered and an ugly leer twisted his thick lips. His ham-like hand fell to the butt of his holstered Luger. "Diablo," he muttered. "Am I hearing right?"

Sarg was glaring at Angel. "So you fell for their line, eh? What did you tell them?"

"That I'd see to it they got what was rightly coming to them. And you two will go along with me on this or we'll dissolve partnership right now. My share will pay them off and that's how it's going to be, gentlemen."

It shook them. Plainly they had never seen this mousey man show the slightest fight. Duarte's eyes grew darker and his grip tightened on his pistol. Sarg cast off the stunning surprise of it, laid a restraining hand on Duarte's arm. "Take it easy, Fabian. Our dear partner is without knowledge of what we plan, remember that. Listen, Angel. We've just come from Paso. Pancho Villa is there. He's just come back from Nogales, where he raised money to start another revolution. Ha, what a beautiful joke."

"Go on!" commanded Angel, gathering confidence.

"Patience, Angel. This is too good to be true. Through Teniente Roman Estudilla, who is closer than ever to Villa, we have been in contact with the fool Puma of the Sierra. Fabian and I have signed a contract with him. We'll deliver guns and ammunition to a designated place, where he will turn over to us a very material sum of money and take the stuff off our hands. When he tries to run it across the line, he will be butchered by a group of Chihuahua rancheros who will pay us one hundred thousand pesos for delivering him to their guns."

"Crime after crime!" raged Charles Angel. "I'll have no part of it. I want no more blood money!"

"And so," continued Sarg, quietly and without spleen, "you see Horn and Castro would be just throwing away the money, even if they could get it to Pancho in time, which they can't. We'll move the stuff south tomorrow night. Still want to split up this business? Still want to turn over yours to two professional revolutionaries who will probably reward you with a bullet in the guts?"

"Yes." Angel's jaw was set and his eyes were full of loathing for the pair he had long knuckled to. "We don't think alike, Sarg. I've had enough. At least, I can spend the rest of my life trying to undo

the evil you two have led me into. I'm an importer, not a thief and murderer."

"*Carramba!*" barked Duarte, and his Lugar slid from its sheath. "Shall I kill him, Anton?"

"And bring the rabble here when government agents are combing the border for gun-runners? Save your lead. In quitting, he's presenting us with better than sixty-five thousand dollars—what his cut of this new business would be. No, let him quit. Come on, Angel. We'll go to the house of Lawyer Baca and have him draw up the papers. In the morning you'll get your money and after that I don't care what you do—so long as you keep your mouth shut. Talk, and we'll kill you. Blow out that lamp and let's get out of here."

Sarg moved to the door, followed by Duarte, who still muttered Spanish curses under his breath. Charles Angel turned the wick down with fingers that trembled, blew out the flame. Bootsteps receded through the black silence of the warehouse. A door closed. There was the mutter of voices drawing away. The three behind the partition drew long breaths, Esther crying softly with emotion. "I . . . I was so proud of my father," she sobbed. "So surprised at Sarg, who is a hateful, violent man."

"The leopard doesn't change its spots," said Demery, drily. "I only hope their greed keeps them more than willing to buy him out. Juan, you understand all?"

"All, Don Cuerno. At last we have the chance we've wanted. We must get word to Don Pancho, no?"

"Yes, and fast. If he's in Paso, he's well hidden from Department of Justice officials, who would throw him behind barb wire before he could say viva. We may have trouble locating him. Thank you, Esther, for suggesting we listen. We'll take you home and light out."

"So . . . soon?" There was disappointment in Esther's tone as she gave him her hand and allowed herself to be led along a gloomy aisle between cotton bales. "I'm sorry. Dad admires you as a man who had every reason to take his life . . . and didn't. I had hoped we could become better acquainted with you. Is there any . . . any chance you might be coming back this way soon?"

"Who knows?" murmured Demery, thrilling to a meaningful pressure of her fingers. "I guess Juan and I hope more than anything that if the shooting flares up again we'll be standing beside our jefe—Pancho Villa."

"Is it true what Sarg said—that you are professional revolutionaries?"

Demery's lips flattened. "If that means fighting the battle of Mexico's starved and enslaved peons and farmers—yes. If it means taking pay for my father, shot to death by the dictator's rural police, yes. If it means peace, with honor and justice, yes." They had passed through the door, closing it softly. The chill of the winter night struck them like a blow.

Esther was saying, "Then you are a—" when her grip on his hand tightened and she flung about, the fingers of her free hand sinking into his arm. Through the night and from some little distance came the sharp *crack* of a gun. There was a low cry followed by the faint and quickly dying echoes of running bootsteps.

Demery, every muscle springing to fighting life, tore her hands from him. "Take

her home, amigo," he commanded Juan, and broke into a hippety-hop run, favoring a twisted leg that knew no surcease of agony when under pressure.

Down the dusty lane he ran, and into the dustier street. Swerving right, he added a burst of speed, angling across the roadway with a couple of yapping dogs at his heels. He heard the banging of doors and saw lights go out in some of the adobes fronting the street, yet no human shape showed before him. The townsfolk, nearly all of Mexican origin, expatriates because of long schooling in trouble and violence, were curious without wishing to borrow trouble.

Now Demery approached the place from which he judged the shot had come. Several curs formed a half ring, their legs braced, their voices uplifted clamorously. A shadowy figure lay huddled in the dust, at the apex of those pointing canine noses. It was Charles Angel. He had been shot once in the back of the head! He was dead!

THE night was moonless, starless, dark as the inside of a boot. Fog hung like a shroud over El Paso del Norte, muffling the wonted sounds of night, veiling the faint candle lights in the adobe of the Mexican quarter, creating a sense of clammy abandonment. Along the river, at the International Bridge and its northern approaches, American soldiers pulled their necks deeper into the collars of their coats, softly cursing the murk. Somewhere sounded the muted harmony of guitar and tambourine. The shrill laugh of a woman, dogs barking, the raucous braying of a burro, all mixed and were one.

Along a narrow, smelly back street, two shadowy figures moved with measured, guarded steps, counting doorways. Now they paused, listening. "This," said Demery Horn, "must be the place, Juan."

"Si, Don Cuerno. By my count, this is it. It does not look like much. Maybe that drunken peon traded a lie for our money. Shall I knock?"

"*Dios,* no. If this is the place, only the right knock would win us anything but a fight." His fingers wrapped the door knob, slowly turned. "Locked. Let us try to scale the wall and. . . ." He was leading the way toward the corner of the building when a sound behind them silenced him. He and Juan glided around the corner, pressed themselves against the adobes.

The throwing of a bolt had alarmed them. Now the door creaked open. A cloaked figure emerged. From inside came a low voice. "Wake those sleepy *muleros* and have the mules at La Comba de Nogales by twelve o'clock. Wait there for the pass-word—*Destino.*"

"Good!" murmured Juan. "La Comba de Nogales—Walnut Bend of the Rio. *Destino*—Fate. If we learn nothing more, Don Cuerno, it is enough."

Demery didn't answer. The cloaked figure moved way from them, footsteps muffled in the dust. The door closed softly. Demery said, "Now!" and leaped to the portal. He caught the knob and opened the door a little before the man inside could throw the bolt home. And that man, thinking it the return of the one he had just ordered away, jerked the panel wide and said, "Fool, what now?"

"Inside!" Demery's Colt's jabbed the man's stomach. "Not a sound." He shoved the man back into the dark room, pressing him close. Juan, like a shadow, limped along behind him.

The man said: "What would you have? Are you police?"

"*Destino,*" murmured Demery. "Take us to Don Pancho."

"Roman!" The man cried a name. "There are two men here—"

Demery's gun arced and swung, thudding against the fellow's skull. He went down soundlessly, slumping like a candle in an oven. Heavy adobe partitions had muted the call without keeping it from the ears of the man beyond the threshold, where the line of light showed. There was a heavy step and a rattle of spurs. The communicating door flew open and lamplight flooded the dark room, glinting off the leveled guns of Demery and Juan.

The man who stood there, silhouetted against the light from the lamp on the desk, was tall, handsome in his elegant charro costume, polished high boots and peaked sombrero. Demery could not see much of the hard-muscled, emotionless face —nor had he any need to. The way he wore his Luger would have identified him as Roman Estudilla. Even had he not been wearing the gun, Demery would still have

known that magnificent physique, that proud lift of shoulders and arrogantly held head. This was the Judas who had betrayed them to the torture chamber . . . and worse. This was the traitor who, even now, was at the threshold of selling his chief to the butchers for thirty pieces of silver. A flash of red, unreasoning rage swept Demery's brain.

"Well," he said, and vengeance was an undisguised venom in his tone. "Will you look who is here to greet us. Unfortunate for you, Estudilla. More unfortunate for your plan to crucify Don Pancho tonight."

The man stood very straight, staring at them, letting his glance touch the man lying at their feet, weighing the fact that their guns bore upon him. He showed not a tremor of fear, even though this was a figment of a nightmare that had made his nights intolerable. Many, many times he had lived over this scene, never with any judgment but that he must win it with boldness, just as he had won his way up from peonage to position, to affluence and a name.

He looked at these two men, broken by his treachery, not smiling easily and twirling his sharp mustaches, as he had that night when their screams echoed terribly through that dingy cellar, but deadly serious, his long arms hanging smartly at his sides. And he could not imagine any other reason for this call than the will to slay. Nor could he reason out any use for his great gift of words. So he said:

"It is like the spinning of a roulette ball, caballeros!"

He drove his trained hand to his Luger. Juan's bullet spun him around and knocked him down. Then his throat burst asunder at the discharge of Demery's thrice-triggered Colt's.

THE four-foot adobe walls failed to mute those four thunderous explosions. A door burst open and men came rushing in like rabid terriers. Lean, ragged men they were, their bronzed, sandaled feet dragging one spur, their nakedness covered only with shapeless cotton shirts and breeches. But good guns were in their hands and in their dark, flaming eyes was death.

Powerful grips fastened Demery and Juan, tore the smoking weapons from their fingers. Through another door came Pancho Villa and a half dozen lieutenants, among them Rodolfo Fierro, the Iron Man, the Butcher, he of the lithe, responsive body, the leonine head and the cruel Mongol face. Their guns were cocked and ready to fire, but this was no raid and it left them all puzzled.

"So-o-o," it was Fierro who spoke first, failing utterly to recognize the pair in the hands of their men as Villa's one time Chief of Machine Gun Battalions and his Chief of Intelligence. "A pair of Orozco's head lice, eh? Release them, men, and step back while I shoot their ears off."

"Wait!" It was Villa, and the Puma too had changed. His face was drawn. His eyes were red as if from weeping, for he had only learned that afternoon that his old friend and mentor, Don Abraham Gonzales, had been foully murdered by a Federal patrol. Don Pancho's mien now was one of terrible puzzlement, as if the movement of events was too swift to be comprehended. His strange topaz eyes were on Demery and he moved toward him, pausing so close Demery could feel the breath that came from him in gusts. But some of the old fire was in those eyes, and a hurt and a terrible anger.

"I have kept Rodolfo from killing you," he growled. "That is enough luck for one night. Now tell me why you dare come here and shoot down my Chief of Intelligence—you who robbed me when I trusted you, and deserted the cause just as it flowered."

"Jefe, Don Pancho . . . look!" Juan Castro was holding his long hair back, revealing only the scars where his ears had been. "Fierro threatened to shoot off my ears. A poor target, don't you think?"

Villa stared, his lips making a low curse. "Carramba! Who did this?"

Demery lifted his twisted leg that flexed grotesquely at the knee. "And see this, Don Pancho. Poor equipment with which to escape, no?"

The forehead of Pancho Villa corrugated, and again he asked. "Who did this?"

Demery pointed to the shapeless thing that had been Roman Estudilla. "This . . . this Judas, Jefe." He began to talk, recalling their departure from Chihuahua City with the treasure—he and Juan and Estudilla. He told of the warning, of the hurried moving of the valuables, of being seized

by agents of the Metodicos, whisked secretly to the torture cellar in El Paso. Sparing Juan, he spoke as if he himself had cracked. He told of the long period of recuperation in a hospital, of hearing from Juan and of going to San Mateo. He named the three men who ran contraband while masking as importers of Mexican liquor, textiles and handicraft, speaking of the regeneration of Charles Angel and his death at the hands of his murderous partners.

The revolutionaries stared, so silently they seemed not to breathe, until Demery outlined the details of the conspiracy, conceived by Estudilla, to trap Villa and sell him to his enemies. Then their muttered curses rolled through the silence; they swapped fiery glances and dropped their hands to their weapons. Not a man dared disbelieve.

"I have not nursed a will to be revenged upon Estudilla, Jefe," Demery finished. "But only to gather the proof I knew I would need to regain your trust. I shot tonight only because Estudilla knew when we came that the jig was up—unless he could kill us both and seal our lips."

"Es verdad," murmured Juan. "That is true, Don Pancho."

"If you have doubts," added Demery, unable to read the terrible, embittered eyes of this idol of Mexico's peons, "hold us here until you return from an investigation. If your knives do not drink blood at the Comba de Nogales, then it is the hour of payment for Juan and me. But go quickly. There is no time to be lost!"

Then, while the room held its breath pending the Puma's decision, Demery saw the topaz eyes change. So quickly as to seem a miracle, tears had moistened the bronzed cheeks of this strange admixture of steel and silk, of killing rage and whimsical affection. His long arms went out to sweep both Demery and Juan to his massive chest.

"Don Cuerno," he choked, using the name he himself had given Demery. "Juanito mio. Forgive me for believing what this dog told me." He spat upon Estudillo's body and his emotion passed and he was once again the warrior, the man whose genius had won a republic for his beloved *Indios,* who could still find faith in a slough of faithlessness, who faced the task of wrenching his Mexico from the hands of a ruthless savage backed by the might of the Federal army, the treasury, then militarists and rancheros, and the buccaneers of American finance.

For one fleeting moment he seemed to be listening. Maybe it was for the bootsteps of American soldiers, drawn by the sound of shots. Maybe it was to the rising twang of steel guitars from below the border, to the fine native harmony uplifted in new ballads to his glory. Maybe he listened to the earth-shaking rumbles of marching men and firing guns. *Quien sabe?* He turned to his men and there was the old ring of command in his voice.

"Rodolfo, you and I will lead picked men to Comba de Nogales. We will seek out and kill the ambushers silently. Already there has been too much shooting. Don Cuerno and Juan, you will ride with us. Pablo, you and Tomas go with the mules. Hold them in the poplars behind the slaughter house. *Vamonos!*"

Magically, the lights in the house went out. Demery followed Villa out the back where horses, already saddled and bridled, waited. Two by two, with a proper interval between, horsemen debouched from the rear gate in the high adobe wall, melting into the fog.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pancho Villa Rides

SOMETHING more terribly silent and destructive than the four-footed beasts of the night prowled the thick bosque, where the narrow, crooked wood road winds down to the river at Comba de Nogales. The Rio Grande murmured along its low banks, whispering its dark secrets of ten thousand years of warfare, gurgling with laughter that so many destructive warriors had found repose at its yielding, humid bosom.

The fog hung low and thick and through its clammy shroud came a half cry, half squeak that might have been the death agony of some animal at the puma's jaws, but wasn't. It was the last drawn breath of a Metodico agent with a knife hilt-deep in his throat. The gaunt, brown faces of two men were momentarily illuminated as they leaned forward to light their cigarettes at the flame of a match. Their eyes wid-

ened, then went blank. They fell together, their faces crushing out the matchlight between them. And shadows withdrew the blades from their backs, wiped them clean and were gone.

Somewhere the night gave back the low thudding of slow hoofbeats. A voice let loose with, "Hey! Someone moves the caballos . . . ah-h-h-h." Breath ran out to a death rattle and there was none to perpetuate his alarm. One by one the ambushers were ferreted out and slain, perhaps without any warning at all, perhaps confronted by a pair of staring eyes that paralyzed and held them, and wrung agonized cries for mercy before the silent knife struck home.

Apart from this and no happier because of it, a knot of men waited at the bend of the wood road, where it swung at a broad angle and squared down to the river. They waited out the dragging minutes, pacing and fidgeting at the delay, suffering for the smoke Pancho Villa had prohibited, waiting for the trucks of Sarg and Duarte.

Villa alone was patient. He sat with his broad back against the bole of a cottonwood, his strong hands on his knees, his chin sunk upon his breast. He was not asleep, yet filling his mind were dreams of a bloody job that must be done all over again, of his meeting with Orozco, the small country storekeeper who would be ruler of Mexico; dreams of the bill he would present to the foul murderer of Madero—the lovable little idol of the peons; dreams of the great rancheros, whose class hatred kept the hopes of the Metodicos high, whose millions of cattle on thousands of ranges must feed the new peon army and pay for the tools of death.

Now Fierro, restless and alert as a fox, sounded a grunt of satisfaction. "Look! The guns! They come!"

Villa lifted his head. A faint and tremulous vibration rode the fog. The jefe came up. "Keep the guns silent, amigos. The American soldiers have long ears, and no longer than our enemies on the south bank. Don Cuerno, Juan, you two will halt the trucks and hold them in talk while we move along the line. The rest take cover, pronto!"

Demery, with Juan pressed against him, could feel the tremor run along the twisted body of his friend. His lips clasped tight. There was still a shred of doubt in the burdened mind of Don Pancho, doubt never to be erased except in the blood and sweat, hunger, fatigue and camaraderie of campaign and battle. It hurt, but whatever blame it engendered must be added to what he already felt against Sarg and Duarte.

The sounds of the engine exhausts grew slowly in volume. The trucks, heavily loaded, crept snail-like along the faint trace, feeling their way through fog that nullified their lights. Waiting was interminable. Demery and Juan both shivered, and not altogether from the dank wind that seeped upward from the river.

A faint glow pervaded the bosque and, like a creeping dragon, the lead truck came nosing around the bend, its two lights searching vainly. Demery threw his arms wide, lifting and lowering them, and still he was unseen by the driver until he thought the lumbering vehicle would run him down. The truck came to a shuddering stop, its brakes squealing.

Demery leaped toward the cab, snatching

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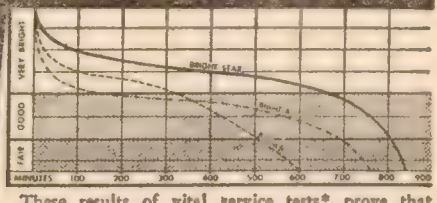

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out his Colt the instant he was out of the light beams. Juan was close behind him, murmuring: *"Caution, amigo.* They are lobos, these fellows."

Demery mounted the step. "The word, amigos?"

"Destino!" A face was thrust down, almost into Demery's own. A gaunt, hatchet face with hollow eyes and bony aquiline nose. Surprise was mirrored in those eyes, and something of dismay. Anton Sarg gasped, "You, Horn? You are with Villa, or is this a trap?" The nose of his Luger eased across the door top.

"I am with Villa, Sarg."

"Where is he?"

"Close. The clearing is just ahead. Pull your trucks into it and cut the motors."

Sarg growled and, wedged between him and the driver, Fabian Duarte muttered, "I smell treachery, Anton. If there seems to be anything fishy, blow this cabron to hell and sound that whistle. Go ahead, driver."

"Whistle?" asked Demery, riding the running board as the truck eased ahead. "What do you mean?"

"I may as well tell you, Horn. If Villa tries any funny business with us, it will cost him plenty. We're prepared to fight if we have to."

DEMERY laughed at the man's obvious worry and fear, thinking back to a night when Sarg's fears had been deeply buried beneath greed and cruelty and haughty ostentation. Now, while his vehicle left the road and circled out across a clearing where ricks of stovewood were still piled, he and his equally murderous partner held silent, their muscles and nerves keyed taut as they watched for the thing they knew best—faithlessness.

Now, at a word from Demery, the truck halted and the motor died. Behind them, four others, piled high with contraband and covered with brown canvas sheets, braked to a stop and grew silent. After the clamor of the exhausts, the night suddenly seemed filled with an unearthly silence. Headlights gleamed wanly, wisps of fog drifting across the acetylene beams. The shadows of men showed as the weary drivers got out to stretch their legs. Truck doors slammed.

Sarg stepped from the cab, the gross Duarte behind him. They stood there looking nervously toward the black line of the forest, their Lugers leveled and ready. Sarg cleared his throat. "Well, Horn? Where is Pancho Villa?"

"Here, señor." It was the heavy voice of the Puma. He came striding out of the murk, three men behind him, carrying heavy bags of coin. "You are on time, amigos, and I have the gold with me. You will want to count it, no?"

"No," said Sarg. "Bring it into the light and show me it's gold money, not 'dobe dollars."

Don Pancho laughed at his doubt, motioned his men into the headlight flare. The leathern bags clinked as they dropped heavily. Rawhide strings were loosed, the bags thrown open to reveal the soft yellow glitter of American golden eagles. Sarg knelt, ran his fingers into the bags, less to savor the feel of the money than to satisfy himself that this was not a golden veneer over dross. Now he rose. "Tie them up," he commanded, coldly. "My boys will put them into their tool boxes."

Men had picked up the treasure bags and were staggering back along the line with them. Sarg rose to his full height, an arrogant smile playing about his down-curving lips. "Very well, Villa. The stuff is yours. Take it away."

Don Pancho was smiling at him. "You are very sure, señor, that it is guns and cartridges under the tarpaulins."

"I hope to die if they're not."

"Good." Villa lifted his voice. "Mule drivers . . . pronto!"

From some distance away came the answering shouts of the muleros, the sudden crashing of animals stirred into motion. Sarg and Villa stared into each other's eyes, the shrunken cheeks of the gun runner a little gray. His right hand dropped to the butt of his Luger. His left came to his lips and through the timber rang the shrill blast of a whistle.

Nothing happened. Again, almost hysterically, Sarg sounded the call.

"M-m-m-m," a chuckle welled into the thick throat of Pancho Villa.

Sarg licked his lips and a terrible fear blossomed in his sunken eyes. Villa's laughter died. "They do not hear you, señor."

It was fighting time and dying time and Sarg knew it. His Luger came flashing

out. Don Pancho lunged, his powerful right arm striking like a snake. His knife sank to the hilt in Sarg's breast. Duarte got his gun out and pointed it at the Puma before Juan Castro pivoted off the fender and stabbed him to death.

There was a rush of men schooled in the violence of revolt. The drivers, with no stomach for battle, cried out and raised their hands. But the gesture of surrender did not save them. They had taken cards and there was no pulling their bets. Keen pointed blades gave back the reflections of headlight beams. An agonized "Mercy!" rang through the tree aisles. And then it was done.

The mules came with a rush. The tarpaulins came off the loads. Men swarmed over the trucks, passing down crated guns and ammunition.

Demery, along with the others, mounted, rode down to the river, where muleloads of contraband were splashing across to Ysleta, "the little island," which divided the Rio into twin fordings. Don Pancho drew rein, filling his great chest with air blown across from his beloved Mexico. Trusted men were around him, but he spoke less to them than to himself.

"Amigos, great visions are painted on my heart. The trail leads back. Again the peon will hear and answer the old cry —*Tierra y Patria.* The price will be high, but the enemies of the Fatherland shall pay it. And we shall establish *La Republica de los Indios,* with the spirit of Madero—the saint who would not harm a fly, leading us."

His head tipped down and he seemed to be thinking. Those about him respected his mood and remained silent. Presently he raised his head, turning to where Demery and Juan sat their horses, stirrup to stirrup. "My friends, it is easy for some men to soon forget the sort of thing you have undergone for the cause, and this night have done for me. But Pancho Villa never forgets. Juan, you will rank major and Assistant Chief of Transport, under Fierro."

"I am honored, mi jefe." Juan's voice shook with his joy.

"And you, Don Cuerno, will rank Coronel, commanding a regiment of machine gunners and grenadiers."

"Gracias, jefe, but I cannot accept."

"No?" A coldness crept into the Puma's voice. "Porque? And why not?"

"I am not a whole man, mi jefe. I have campaigned with you and I know the rigors. My body will not again stand it; those lying back yonder saw well to that, and the traitor, Estudilla, and the Metodicos you ride to destroy. I admire the judgment of brave little Juan Castro, who will march with you on his nerve until his twisted body fails and his brave heart stops. I too could do that, and perhaps I should, but—"

"But what, Don Cuerno?"

"I have come from San Mateo. And when I left there, I left part of myself."

Villa's brow was furrowed with puzzlement. Then enlightenment came and that infectious belly laugh shook him. "Ah-h-h! A woman. As I remember you, my friend, you were never one for the señoritas. When love comes to such a one, it hits hard. I myself, who have had many loves, have taken time out of soldiering to pay court to my querida. And you, Don Cuerno, who have served me so faithfully and well, let us say that is what you are doing—taking time out. And when she has warmed your arms, my friend, and the call to battle is a throb in your throat, ride again to me and we will go to Mexico City together. Adios."

His hand came out to grip Demery's. Then he snapped an order and, followed by his men, was breasting the stirrup-deep water. Juan remained a moment, his palm meeting Demery's. "Good bye, Don Cuerno. You were right, but . . . but I think I had rather die in the service of my chief than to live to be a hundred."

"I understand, Juan. Maybe I too will feel the same. Until then—fare thee well, amigo."

"Go with God, my friend." He put his horse into the river and for long moments Demery listened to the diminishing swish and splash of their going. A strong man and his valiant followers were riding to gather a host. And it seemed to Demery, as he listened, that he could hear the first echoes of the cry that was to raise a new Army of the North from the ageless dust of Mexico. Somehow he knew he would never see them again. Saddened, he turned his horse and rode toward San Mateo.

THE END

GUNSMOKE IN HIS EYES

Death held open house when that cold-deck little killer called the Kid appointed Tim Morgan, crippled ex-shotgun guard, to tally for Boothill, Tim's own best friend!

HE PAUSED for a moment just within the swinging doors, his curiosity lifeless, gray eyes peering carefully about the noisy, smoke-fogged saloon. He was young, not more than twenty. He had a weak, boyish chin, and there was an unhandsome droop to one corner of his mouth.

Tim Morgan, sitting at a corner table and waiting for Dad Wilks to show up for their nightly checker game, noticed him first. He squinted his eyes in thought. Something queer about this kid, he decided. At first glance, you might put him down, judging from the pallor of his face, as a tenderfoot, new to the West.

But if he had been a tenderfoot his outfit would most likely have shown some signs of newness. On the contrary, from worn black sombrero to battered boots, the youth's outfit showed hard and long wear. And Tim noted particularly his gun, its holster tied carefully down to his thigh. That was hardly the indication of a greenhorn.

Tim watched as the new-comer made his way through the huddle of men along the bar, edged into an empty place, and ordered a drink, Tim didn't see exactly how it started, but one of the Bar J cowhands, standing beside him, must have jogged the stranger's elbow. Next moment the stranger was cursing fluently, staring down at his whiskey-stained shirt and half-empty glass.

The blank, indifferent look was gone from his eyes. There was a hard, savage luster shining from their depths. He reached over, spun the startled Bar J hand around, and drove a fist to the man's jaw.

The man picked himself up off the floor, muttering ominously, his hand hovering close to the sixgun at his side. Then Buck Bennett, the Bar J foreman, took a hand.

"Sonny," he said in a harsh, unfriendly voice, "Hank here happens to be a friend of mine. And I don't hold with strange gents walkin' in and knockin' down my friends!"

The stranger let his gray eyes rest on the big foreman's face, but he didn't say anything. He even looked a little scared.

Buck seemed to think so anyway, because he eased up a little. He said, "Of course, if you was to apologize to Hank and buy a round of drinks fer everybody present, I might fergit about what happened."

The gray-eyed kid stood looking at him for a while in silence. Then the droopy corner of his mouth lifted in a faint smirk. Slowly, deliberately, he turned his back on Buck and ordered another drink.

A dull red burned under the heavy tan of the foreman's face. "Mebbe you didn't hear what I said?" He said it in a soft voice, but by now the room was so quiet Tim Morgan heard the words distinctly where he sat.

The stranger lifted his glass and turned, the faint, smiling look still on his weak, boyish features. "Yeah," he replied. "I heard what you said. You wanted a drink. Well, here—" He suddenly flung the contents of his glass into the big man's face. "Have one on me!"

Tim gripped the table as though he intended to get to his feet. Then he remembered and settled back again. That fool kid! Someone should have tipped him off who Buck Bennett was. But it was too late now.

The Bar J foreman was wiping his face with the back of his hand. His small eyes were savage blue flames in his brown, leathery countenance.

"Mister," he said slowly, "you should never have come to Bitter Creek. You'll never leave here alive."

The youthful stranger's eyes still betrayed a careless gleam of amusement. "That's yore opinion," he said flatly.

After that there could be only one ending. The men before the bar melted away hurriedly, some heading out through the batwings, others scurrying across the room to get out of the line of fire.

Just then a whiskery, red-faced little man fought his way through the departing mob and staggered over to the bar. "Bartender,"

he called, "Bartender! Now where in tarnation's that blamed bartender gone? Can't a man—"

He broke off suddenly, his eyes popping almost out of his head. He was staring straight at the stranger. "Jumpin' Jeremiah!" he blurted. "It's the Kid! Blamed if 'taint the Kid!"

Buck Bennett's jaw dropped. He stared from the unsteady old-timer to the youth and back again. There was an odd, greenish tinge to his face now, and he swallowed hard, like a man suddenly sick to his stomach. In this country, there was only one man they called the "Kid."

FOR several long seconds, the big man stood hesitating. Then he turned and headed for the door. The Kid watched him go, the curl to his lips more evident now. The other Bar J ranch-hands, shame-faced and sullen, departed after their foreman, slipping out like whipped curs.

"Next drink is on the house," announced the bartender, who had slipped back to his place behind the bar as quietly as he had left it. "Step right up, gents, and name yore brand!"

Men resumed their places at the bar, and the hum of voices mingled with the clink of glasses once again.

At this moment Dad Wilks pushed through the doors and headed for Tim's table. He was a dried-up little wisp of a man with snowy hair and a mustache that hid the corners of his mouth. But there was a briskness about his walk, and a gleam to his bright blue eyes that belied his years.

"You're a quarter of an hour late, Dad."

"Sorry, boy. Had some important business to take keer of."

"Such as what?"

The Kid stood over the cowhand, a hard, savage luster in his eyes.

By HARRISON COLT

"Such as orderin' myself a brand new pair o' six-shooters."

"Six-shooters!" Tim stared at the old man with leery eyes. He had learned to take everything Dad said with a grain of salt. The old duffer was fond of embroidering the truth when he thought he could get away with it.

"What would you be needin' a pair of shootin'-irons fer, Dad?"

Dad Wilks frowned, and tugged grimly at one end of his straggly, white mustache. "They's an ornery varmint walkin' the strets of Bitter Creek that oughta have somethin' done about him. I aim to do it!"

Tim saw that the old man was in dead earnest. "You wouldn't be referrin' to Riley Thompson?"

"I might be, at thet!"

Tim smiled at the thought of Dad gunning for Bitter Creek's most powerful citizen—smooth, suave, cigar-chewing Riley Thompson, owner of the big Double K spread. Not that he didn't sympathize with the old man's viewpoint. Bitter Creek would be better off without the ruthless, grasping ranch-owner.

"What brought this on, Dad?"

"Jest this, son." Dad's voice was angry, outraged. "I jest heard about Thompson takin' over the mortgage on widder Nelson's Slashed C outfit from the bank. And yuh know what thet means!"

Tim nodded. It had happened before that Thompson had bought mortgages on land adjoining his own. Invariably, the same thing had happened. Disaster had settled down upon the mortgaged ranch. Cattle were rustled, water-holes poisoned, ranch buildings burned. And when time for payment arrived, Thompson had taken over.

Dad settled himself in his chair and stared at the checker board in front of him. But it was plain his thoughts weren't on the game. "'Taint hardly two months since Chuck Nelson got killed in thet stage hold-up, an' already Thompson's tryin' to find ways to git his widder off the Slashed C!"

Tim grinned a little. "I wouldn't take it too hard, Dad. Ain't you overlookin' one thing? Bill Treeger is still ramroddin' the Slashed C. I got a hunch as long as he's around that neither Thompson, nor anybody else, will dare try any funny business."

Dad lost a little of his grimness. "Reckon yuh could be right at thet, boy. Folks has got a powerful lot o' respect for Bill Treeger—'specially after what he done to them no-good skunks what held up the Eagle River stage and killed his boss."

After that, conversation between the two men fell off as they concentrated on the game. Tim was the better player, and when he desired to, he could win almost at will. This evening, through some perversity of mood, he chose to keep the old man losing.

Tim chuckled inwardly at the look on Dad Wilk's face as fortune frowned his way. Dad loved to win, liked to brag of his skill. He would stoop to any means to gain a victory. For this reason Tim was forced to watch him closely. Dad had a habit of stealing your checkers off the board if he thought you weren't looking.

Now, looking up suddenly, he surprised Dad's gnarled old hand whisking one of the red counters off the board. "I saw you, Dad," he accused. "Put that back. Put it back."

"What yuh talkin' about?"

"You took one of my men, Dad. Now, come on—put it back!"

"Dad-blast yore ornery hide, Tim Morgan!" exclaimed Dad angrily. "Yuh saw no sech thing! It's like I said afore. What yuh need is a pair o' spectacles, so's yuh can really see what's goin' on! Was I as blind as you. . . ."

Tim sighed. It was useless to argue with the old man. When he was caught in the act, he always pretended it was Tim's vision that was at fault. Tim knew he'd rather be bit by a rattler than admit the truth.

A moment later, this game having ended—like the others—in disaster for the old man, Dad pushed back his chair. "I'll be back," he promised. "Yuh can't stay lucky all evenin'. But I got to see Mel Biers a minute." He got up and walked over to where Mel Biers stood leaning against the bar.

Tim grinned, and set the counters in their places for the next game. He decided he had been a little hard on the old-timer. When he came back, Tim would allow him to win a couple of games.

"That's a new one on me," said a boyish voice. "Comin' to a saloon to play checkers!"

TIM lifted startled eyes. The Kid was standing beside the table, staring down at him. His weak mouth curled upward in a grimace of either friendliness or amusement. Tim could not decide which. "Yeah, I like the game."

The slim, youthful man gave an amused grunt. "Seein' as how you ain't been doin' any drinkin', you might be a good one to answer a few questions fer me."

Tim's eyes narrowed. "Questions?"

The Kid slipped into Dad's vacated chair. "Just a little information about who's who in these parts."

"What do you want to know?"

"You know a gent named Bill Treeger?"

Tim studied the blank-eyed youth a moment. Then he nodded his head. "He's the Slashed C foreman. What you want of him?"

The Kid ignored the query. "He comes in here sometimes, I understand?"

"Yeah. Sometimes."

"He's not here now?"

Tim let his gaze travel over the faces of the customers in the room. "No. He's not here now."

For just an instant something flickered in the Kid's dead eyes. "I got something to settle with this Treeger gent," he said grimly. "Stopped over in Bitter Creek just on purpose. After I get that little matter tended to, I'll be ridin' on."

"You got something against Treeger?"

"Plenty. He pumped lead into Will Tate and Mexican Joe. They were friends of mine."

"Will Tate and Mexican Joe!" Tim's voice was startled. But them were the men who—"

"Yeah," cut in the Kid. They were the ones who held up the Eagle River stage. What of it? They were friends of mine!"

"Mebbe you don't know what happened? They shot and killed Chuck Nelson, owner of the Slashed C. Likewise, the stage-driver. And the shotgun guard—" Tim's voice had a queer tremor in it "—they filled his legs full of buckshot, made a cripple of him!"

The Kid shrugged. "Mebbe so. That don't change nothin'. They was still my friends. Treeger should of remembered that!"

"You reckon he didn't have the right to hunt down the men that killed his boss and give them the same dose?"

The Kid acted as though he hadn't heard the question. After a moment he said, "When Treeger steps through that door, I want you to give me the high sign, see?"

Tim's blunt, honest face hardened. He didn't say anything. But he was doing some fast thinking. He knew that the Kid wouldn't leave town until he had accomplished what he had come for. There would be no point in refusing to point out the Slashed C foreman. The Kid would find him sooner or later anyhow. And to refuse might transform Tim Morgan into nothing more than an additional notch on the killer's gun.

"All right," he said. "I'll tell you when he comes in."

"Now you're talkin' sense," said the Kid.

Tim leaned back in his chair and waited, his eyes on the batwings. Every couple of minutes now they were swinging open to admit some new gent with a thirst. Tim observed that Dad Wilks had concluded his talk with the merchant and was casting

(Continued on page 96)

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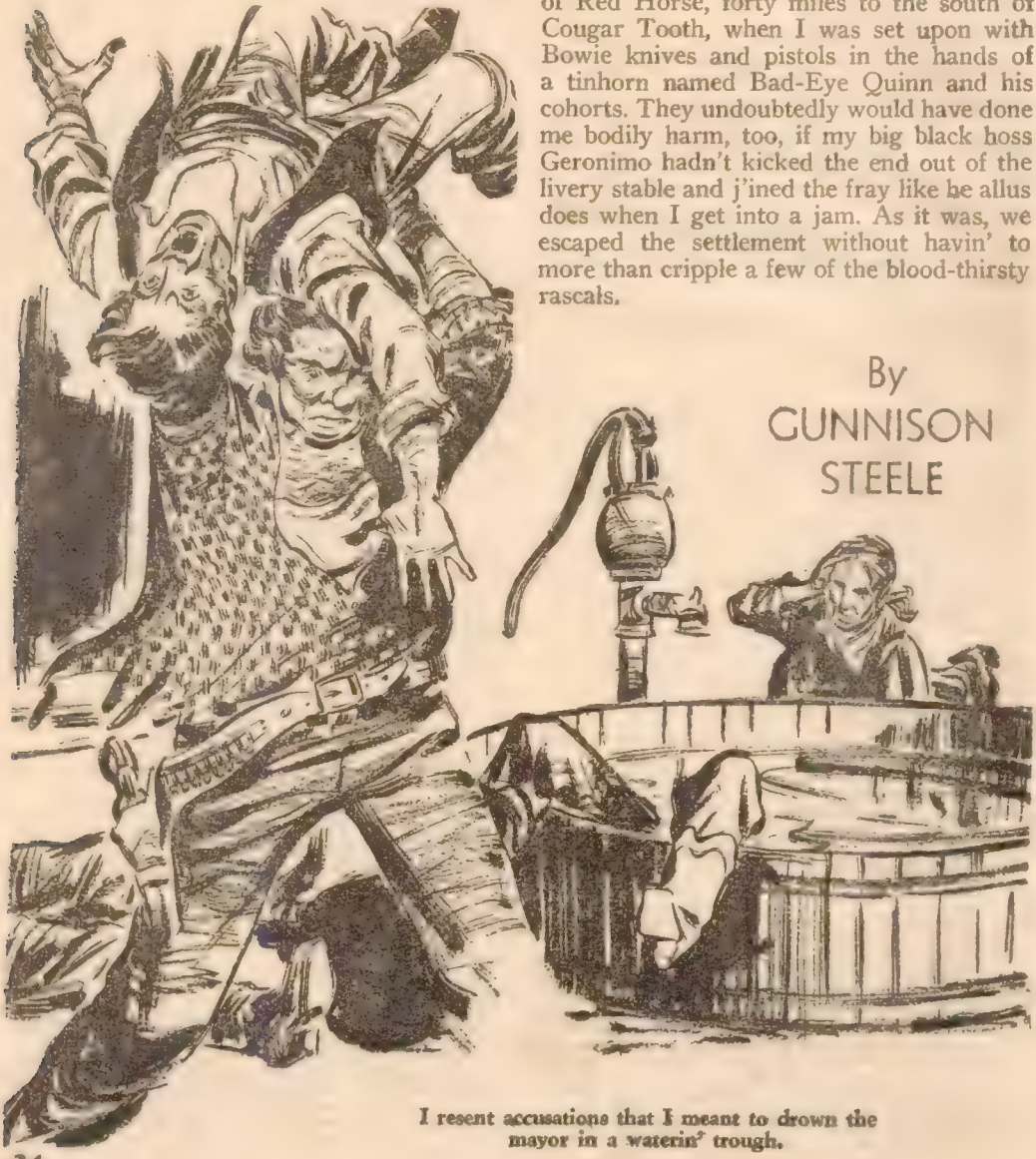
THE PISTOL PREACHMENT OF BILDAD SHANE

By GUNNISON STEELE

IT'S been whispered about that us Texas Shanes glory in strife and blood-lettin', but that's a slanderous lie circulated by our enemies. We're peaceable, God-fearin' folks which hate vi'lence in all its forms.

"Peace is a fine thing, Bildad," I remember my Pap tellin' me when I was a button. "And if anybody tries to preach different, it's yore bounden duty to lay hands onto the villain and teach him that the penalty for such wicked thinkin' is a bashed head!"

Which I have always tried to do, and I reckon the scoundrels of Cougar Tooth, Montana—them as survived—will now admit that Pap was right. It had all started two days before in the mountain settlement of Red Horse, forty miles to the south of Cougar Tooth, when I was set upon with Bowie knives and pistols in the hands of a tinhorn named Bad-Eye Quinn and his cohorts. They undoubtedly would have done me bodily harm, too, if my big black hoss Geronimo hadn't kicked the end out of the livery stable and j'ined the fray like he allus does when I get into a jam. As it was, we escaped the settlement without havin' to more than cripple a few of the blood-thirsty rascals.



I resent accusations that I meant to drown the mayor in a waterin' trough.

"Peace is a fine thing, Bildad," Pap allus told me, "And if anybody tries to preach different, it's yore bounden duty to lay hands onto the villain and teach him that the penalty for such wicked thinkin' is a bashed head!"

After fleein' Red Horse I'd headed for Cougar Tooth, hopin' for peace and quiet, which, onfortunately, I didn't find, mainly because this Bad-Eye Quinn had followed me there. Why, I don't know, unless he had some peculiar ideas about gettin' back the thousand dollars I'd accidently won off him in the poker game in Red Horse. Anyway, what happened in Cougar Tooth wasn't my fault—all I done was try to protect my life and honor—and it's more perfidious lies when they claim I meant to break the judge's leg or nearly drown the town marshal when he accidently bumped into a barrel of beer in the excitement.

Besides which, one man and one hoss plainly couldn't inflict the damage they claim Cougar Tooth suffered. It must of been a cyclone that whoomed down out of the mountains after we left. Beginnin' the mornin' after we arrove in Cougar Tooth the night before, when I woke up in a place without knowin' how I'd got there and why, it happened like this:

AT FIRST I thought I was in the wilderness and it was rainin', but when I opened my eyes I saw how wrong I was. It taken me a full minute to focus my eyes on the big, hook-nosed gent with the bucket in his hand. The bucket was empty, Hook Nose havin' just flang its evil-smellin' contents onto my face.

I riz up with an outraged beller and reached for my pistols.

Only, onfortunately, my pistols was gone, along with most of my shirt and other raiment. I certainly never expected to wake up in such a condition. Then I saw that between me and Hook Nose was somethin' that looked a lot like bars.

Cut to the quick by the shame of it, I roared, "Is this here a jail I'm in? Unlock that door and sot me free, or I'll drink yore heart's blood!"

"It ain't a ladies' sewin' circle yo're in," Hook Nose grins. "And yo're lucky to get even a swig of that moppin' water I just doused you with. You ready to stand trial?"

"Stand trial?" I yelled. Then I quieted, seein' the badge on Hook Nose's shirt. "You the law in this here Cougar Tooth?"

"Town marshal. It was me that flang you in jail last night, after you'd wrecked the saloon and nearly killed half a dozen men. Now I've got to take you before Judge Tweek for trial. Don't tell me you don't remember what happened."

I said I did, up to a certain p'int, which was when the barkeep had suggested that I cease hostilities long enough to drink the pint of whisky which he held out to me. I'd done so, not wishin' to appear discourteous—and that was the last I remembered. Now I saw it all, and my dander rose.

"That whisky was doped!" I roared, layin' hands on the cell door and near wrenchin' it asunder, only not quite. "Have I walked unbeknownst amongst a den of killers and thieves, or worse? Sot me free so I can leave this on-Godly place!"

Hook Nose drew his pistol, and said, "You'll leave, all right—in a box—if you don't do like I say. It ain't for me to say whether you're innocent or guilty as charged. But I got to uphold the dignity of the law. I'm takin' you to the cou'troom up front now, where the judge and witnesses are waitin' to give you a fair and impartial trial. You aim to go peaceable, or you want me to bash you over the head with this pistol and drag you to the bar o' justice?"

I'd never been more imposed on in all my twenty years. But us Shanes is law-abidin' folks, so I said I'd go peaceable. I knowed I hadn't done nothing wrong, and I figured I'd be sot free quick, as soon as I explained to the judge how I only pushed a few men out of my way tryin' to escape before the vi'lence started. I knowed he couldn't blame me because Bad-Eye Quinn accidently got hit over the head with a cuspidor and some others lost their balance and fell through windows.

I never saw a more hostile-lookin' bunch than the one in the front room of the jail buildin' which served as a court of justice—all but Judge Tweek, who was a fat little gent with whiskers and a skinful of red-eye, which was plainly a disgraceful condition for a judge to be in so early in the mornin'.

The judge was seated behind a kind of rostrum at one end of the room. The others, maybe a dozen of them, just leaned against the walls. Most of them wore bandages or had black eyes, and I couldn't understand the way they mumbled foorious oaths and fumbled with their weppons as I entered the room.

Among them I saw Bad-Eye Quinn, a dark-faced hombre with off-color eyes who was nearly as big as me—six-foot-four, two hundred and twenty pounds. And the barkeep, a skinny gent with mustaches, who had give me the whiskey to drink. Ignorin' the insultin' way the witnesses glared at me, and the pistol which Hook Nose held onto my spine, I faced Judge Tweek with what dignity I could.

The judge taken a drink from a bottle, and yelled, "Order in the cou't! If there ain't less noise I'll jail the whole dang bunch! Where's the scoundrel you want tried, Marshal?"

"Here he is, Jedge. I figger we oughta make an example of him."

"What's the charge?"

"Crooked poker, wreckin' Beanpole's salon, assault and battery on the person of my brother, Bad-Eye Quinn, not to mention attempted murder, mayhem and a few other things—"

"Slanderous lies!" I bellered. "All I done was—"

"Shut up!" yelled the judge, bangin' on the rostrum with the whisky bottle. "I hereby find the prisoner guilty as hell, an' fine him the sum of five hundred dollars. Next case!"

WELL, sir, that like to of floored me. It irritated me to the p'int where I nearly lost control of myself. I hollered, "You fat-bellied ol' pelican! I'm innercent as a newborn babe, and I got a right to be heard!"

"That'll cost you another hundred. Another crack like that, reflectin' on the dignity of the cou't, and I'll order yuh strung up. Maybe that'd be a good idea. I hereby—"

"Wait a minute, Jedge," said Hook Nose. "I promised this gent a fair trial, even if he is a dirty criminal with the blood of innocent men on his hands."

"I resent sech!" I said, and shoved Hook Nose lightly, causin' him to lose his balance and stumble among the spectators at the back side of the room.

That seemed to infooriate him, and he riz up bellerin' vile oaths and threats. The others grabbed out their pistols and Bowie knives, and for a minute it looked like there'd be a fight, but just then an angel come in through the door and stopped it. Anyway, she looked like an angel to me, with yellow hair and lips like chokeberries and blue eyes that was now flashin' with purty lights as she stomped her foot onto the floor.

"You cowardly bullies!" she said, lookin' at me in a way that kind of made my stummick curl up inside. "Don't you dare lay hands on this poor lone boy. Whatever he's charged with, I'm sure he's innocent. Anyway, he deserves a fair trial."

The spectators, includin' Hook Nose, put away their weppons and slunk back. Glad vi'lence had been averted, I taken off my hat and said, "I thank you, ma'am. I assure you I am innercent and it is all a mistake. I am Bildad Shane, from Texas."

"My name's Rose," she said, smilin' up at me and doin' things with her blue eyes. "Well, I—I this is no place for a girl. I happened to be passing by and heard what was being said. I'm sure you'll get justice now. Good-bye, Bildad."

I said good-bye, and watched as she kind of floated out of the room. I decided I would look her up after I had got this shameful business settled. I turned back to the judge, who was suckin' at his bottle again. Hook Nose was still glarin' in an onfriendly manner which I couldn't understand.

The judge asked what my name was and where I was from, and I said, "Didn't you just hear me tell that purty gal with the yeller hair that I'm Bildad Shane, from Texas? And I'm innercent of any wrong doin'. I demand you sot me free."

"Who's bringin' the charges?" the judge demanded.

"Me, Yore Honor," Bad-Eye Quinn said, comin' forward. "When he arrove amongst us in Red Horse two days ago, like a wolf amongst sheep, how could we know he was a manyac as well as a crook? Besides assaultin' me with deadly weppons, he rooked me out of over a thousand dollars with crooked poker cards."

"Bad-Eye," I said, more in sorrer than in anger, "I see you are an onprincipled liar as well as a crook. Yore Honor, all I

done was kind of mess up the marks he'd already placed onto the cards, maybe addin' a few of my own, and it must of confoosed him so he bet on the wrong hands. Was there anything dishonest in that, Yore Honor?"

The drunk old sinner wagged his head.

"Whar's the thousand you won off Bad-Eye?" he asked. "It wasn't on you, 'cause we searched you after Beanpole'd give you that doped—"

"Yore Honor, we ain't interested only in what's happened here in our own fair city of Cougar Tooth," Hook Nose says quick. "And I wouldn't want anybody to think that Bad-Eye bein' my brother perjudices me in his favor. Where's the thousand?" he says to me.

"I cached it," I said, lookin' severely about me. "And now I'm glad I did. It looks like in my innercence I've blundered amongst evil companions. I win that thousand fair and square, only changin' a few of the marks already onto the cards—"

"You win it by fraud and deceit!" Bad-Eye howled, fumblin' with the butt of his pistol. "How was I to know you'd changed the queens to look like aces and vice-versy? Make the treacherous scoundrel tell where the money is—"

"Order in the cou't!" yelled the judge, and I put down the bench I'd absent-mindedly picked up. "Go on with yore story, young feller. How come you to head fer Cougar Tooth?"

"Seekin' peace and quiet, Yore Honor, which in my innercence I hoped to find here. But I hadn't been here an hour, when what did I find? Bad-Eye had follered me from Red Horse, ondoubtedly bent on stirrin' up more vi'lence and blood-shed. The only reason I agreed to sot into another poker game with him and some others, acrost in the Boarshead Saloon, was to avoid strife and maybe hard feelin'. It taken me maybe half an hour to remark the face cards in the crooked deck Bad-Eye had run in, whilst in the meanwhile I ignored the aces and kings he taken from his sleeves and off the bottom of the deck. But when he accused me of bein' a crook, that was too much."

"You heard him admit he was playin' with marked cards, yore honor! Then he

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assaulted me with a damned table leg—"

"I done no such!" I roared. "It was a cuspidor, which I just happened to have in my hand, and then only after you'd drawed a Bowie knife and come at me with what I took to be evil intent. Then about a dozen other scoundrels come onto me, Yore Honor, after which it was every man for hisself."

"He's ruint me," Beanpole declared, all choked with emotion. "He wrecked my bar and broke all my whisky and knocked a hole in the wall when he flang Sid Tanner through it, not to mention bustin' out all the windows. He ain't human. Make him tell where the thousand is, Yore Honor, so he kin pay for the damage he inflicted."

"Such ain't the way you talked last night, Beanpole," I said. "When the hostilities was at their worst, you crawled out from under the bar with a pint of whisky which you handed to me and said, 'I'm yore friend, Bildad. Drink this likker—maybe it'll give you the strength to finish massacrin' these villains.' Thinkin' I'd found a friend at last, I done so, and it was my ondoin'. Beanpole, you onprincipled polecat, that likker was doped!" And I advanced onto him.

But Beanpole give a low moan of terror and fled out onto the street. I started to pursue the scoundrel, but remembered Rose's yeller hair and the way she'd looked at me, and decided to get this over with so I could look her up. It wouldn't be hard to find anybody as purty as her.

"And that's how it was, Yore Honor," I said. "You can see I'm plumb innercent, it bein' me instead of Bad-Eye that was fleeced and lied to and sot upon with murderous weppons. So if you'll give me my hat and guns I'll get onto my hoss Geronimo and head back into the wilderness where I can find some peace amongst the cougars and bears and blood-thirsty redskins."

"Just a minute!" Hook Nose yelled. "What's the verdict, Jedge?"

"Hic—guilty as hell!" the judge said, fumblin' for his bottle. "It's a lot worse'n I thought. I'm raisin' yore fine to—hic—a thousand dollars, young feller—just what you fleeced pore Bad Eye out of."

I give an outraged beller. "Why, you mangy ol' goat, I ain't got no sech, and if I did have I wouldn't—"

"Another hundred for—hic—contempt of cou't!" the old sinner hollered, jumpin' up! and down and takin' another drink in his excitement. He leaned over and listened to somethin' Hook Nose whispered into his ear. "And seein' you ain't got the thousand, the cou't hereby accepts yore hoss and saddle as payment."

"Like hell you will! Tech that hoss and you'll live to regret it till the day you die, if not much longer. I see now I ain't in the clutches of the law, but of a gang of thieves and killers and maybe worse. You spavined ol' wart-hawg, you ain't fit to judge a fight between a sidewinder and a polecat!"

"Contempt of cou't!" the judge howled. "That'll cost yuh—"

"I could use them boots he's wearin', Yore Honor," Bad-Eye Quinn hollered. "Make him shuck 'em."

"Peel off them boots, young feller," the judge ordered. "Besides which, you've got just twenty minutes to get out of Cougar Tooth. And don't come back. Shuck them boots!"

"Over my dead body!" I roared, and reached for my pistols, only onfortunately they still wasn't there. "Tech these boots at yore own risk!"

Judge Tweek waved his bottle at the spectators, and bawled, "I depertize the whole kit-and-kaboodle to carry out the cou't's orders. Separate him from them boots!"

Which they sot out to do, comin' at me from all sides with foorious oaths and what I took to be evil intent. In a minute the court of justice had been turned into somethin' else. Bad-Eye come at me first, mouthin' foul oaths and with a Bowie knife in his hand. I tapped him alongside the head with the chair which somehow had got into my and, and he fell down to the floor with a holler groan. Then he started yellin' damnation and destruction as the others tromped on him in their eagerness to get at me, and I saw there was likely to be a fight.

Hook Nose, the town marshal, had drawed his pistol and was tryin' to shoot me, and would ondoubtedly have succeeded if I hadn't grabbed him by the neck and shook him loose from his weppon.

"I'm a officer," he moaned, for some reason seemin' about to choke. "Don't you dast assault an officer of the law!"

But I didn't pay any attention, because

by now about a dozen more of the villains had laid hands onto me and plainly meant to do me bodily harm. One of them was down onto the floor about my feet, seemin' bent on carryin' out the judge's orders. Maybe he lost seven teeth, like he later claimed, but how did he expect to get kicked in the mouth without losin' some teeth?

I had lifted Hook Nose above my head, and now I bellered, "Stop this disgraceful vi'lence, or I will be forced to protect myself!"

But they ignored me, stumblin' and fallin' over each other in their eagerness to get at me, so you can see that it wasn't my fault. I heard the judge yellin', "Contempt of cou't! I doubles the fine. Take them boots off the hellion—we'll make 'im hoof it into the desert in his sock feet!" Then there was a gurglin' sound like somethin' coming from a bottle.

That was when I flang Hook Nose, and he accidently hit the rostrum, bringin' both it and Judge Tweed crashin' down in ruins. The judge rolled about in the debray, squallin' that he'd been kilt, which he plainly hadn't. Then the old scoundrel riz up out of the wreckage, and I saw that he had a sawed-off shotgun in his hands with which he plainly meant to shoot me.

So I laid hands onto the shotgun and flang it into the street, and that was when the judge got his leg broke, which wasn't my fault either. How did I know he meant to hold onto the shotgun? It was while I was watchin' the old sinner crawl along the street, his bottle still in one hand, that some treacherous skunk busted the bench over my head unbeknowst and behind. Which surprised me to the p'int where I lost my balance and fell to the floor, and them nearly two dozen blood-thirsty varmints fell onto me with their boots and clubbed pistols and foul oaths.

Well, sir, I am nearly ashamed to tell what follered. I hope word never gets back to my Pap in Texas that I let myself be bested by not quite two dozen men with only pistols and Bowies. But that is what happened, and I never have got quite clear in my mind what happened durin' the next thirty minutes or so.

But the next thing I knowed I was a mile out onto the desert, surrounded by not quite two dozen gents on hosses and with guns in their hands which looked like they had been in some kind of a fight. Only I didn't have any hoss, nor any boots either. My size 12 boots was tied to Hook Nose's saddlehorn.

I riz up with a bitter oath, prepared to start the hostilities ag'in. Only I found that I couldn't do any such, for my hands was tied behind me with stout ropes which I couldn't break.

"What's the meanin' of this?" I bellered. "Gimme back my boots and guns and my Geronimo hoss, or I'll cut out yore hearts and feed 'em to the coyotes!"

"Start walkin', Bum," Hook Nose said, p'intin' acrost the desert. "If we wasn't sech soft-hearted hombres you wouldn't get off so light."

"Where to?" I asked.

"Suit yoreself—just so it ain't back to Cougar Tooth. Don't come back here if you value yore life. Acrost the desert, ten miles away, is the town of Red Grizzly. Any other direction, it's forty miles to a town. Take yore choice."

"You aim to turn me into the wilderness, without hoss or gun—"

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"Or boots. We'd untie yore hands, only we ain't sech fools as to give you another chance to damn near massacre us. Start walkin'!"

"You dirty toads!" I roared. "You'll all rue this day. Us Shanes are peace-lovin' and long-sufferin', but we don't take no sech layin' down. I'll be back and—"

"Git, cuss you!" Hook Nose roared, and they all p'inted their pistols at me and started makin' vile threats.

So I turned and walked with what dignity I could into the desert, knowin' that if I didn't pretend to do their biddin' they would ondoubtedly kill me and maybe fling me back in jail to boot. I could hear the scoundrels hollerin' and jeerin' at me, but I didn't look back, and purty soon I went over a ridge where both them and Cougar Tooth was lost from my view.

It was a bitter dose to have to take, and I hoped my Pap never would hear about it. I was burnin' with shame, and the sand that had got into my socks. But I'd made up my mind as to what I aimed to do, and once us Shanes has sot our minds to somethin' we don't turn aside for nothin'. I couldn't turn back to Cougar Tooth and j'ine in mortal combat with the crooks who had fleeced and tricked and humilerated me, right now, for my hands was tied behind me. It was the first ropes I'd ever saw that I couldn't break. Besides, without my pistols and Bowie, and maybe Geronimo locked up where he couldn't help me, I would ondoubtedly have a hard time bestin' the whole town.

So I decided to swaller my pride and hoof it acrost the desert to Red Grizzly ten miles away, where I'd get cut loose, acquire more weppons and a hoss. Then I'd return to Cougar Tooth, and the Devil take them as was slow in fleein'."

So I walked on, and the sun got hotter and hotter, and purty soon the rocks had cut my socks to pieces. I'd traveled what I taken to be about five miles when I heard a clatter of hoofs behind me, and turned to see a horse and rider bearin' down onto me.

Then my heart flopped over. It was a girl, her yeller hair flyin' into the wind, and she rode up close and jumped down beside me. It was Rose, who in her innerence had done her best to befriend me back there in Cougar Tooth. She looked at my feet, and my tied hands, and at how hot I was, and I could tell she was near to bust out cryin'.

"You poor, poor boy," she cooed. "I knew the cowardly beasts had done something awful to you. Here, let me cut your poor hands loose," she said, fumblin' amongst her garments for a knife.

She cut me loose. "Thank you, ma'am," I said, takin' off my hat before rememberin' I didn't have one. "But you shouldn't of done this. Ain't it liable to get you into trouble with them onprincipled polecats back yonder?"

"Maybe it will," she admitted, tossin' her yeller hair and lookin' shyly up at me. "But I had to take the chance—for you. I could tell, when I first saw you, that you were a gentleman."

I thanked her ag'in, and said, "I allus try to be. But what is a sweet, innercent girl like you doin' amongst them wolves?"

"Please don't misjudge me, Bildad," she said, tears comin' into her big blue eyes. "But Sam Quinn, the town marshal, is my step-daddy, my sainted mother havin' passed on five years ago. He got himself appointed my guardian, and I've had to slave for him. I've tried to run away, several times, but each time he caught me and brought me back. He—he beats me—and—and—" She couldn't go on, she was so choked up with emotion.

"The black-livered snake!" I roared, fumblin' for my pistols. "I wish I'd knowed that whilst I had my hands onto his neck. But don't you worry, gal—you won't have to be scared of ol' Hook Nose anymore when I'm finished with him. I'll take you out'n that den of sin and iniquity!"

"I know I can depend on you, Bildad," she said, smilin' bravely through her tears. "But you can't go back there now—they would surely kill you."

"I don't aim to," I said. "I aim to travel on to Red Grizzly acrost this desert, where I will rearm myself, get onto a hoss and go back amongst the villains to smite them hip and thigh."

Rose thought a while, then said. "That won't be necessary. I know where there's a ranch close to here, owned by an old man named Jericho Jones who is honest and a friend of mine. We'll go there—that is, if it's agreeable with you."

I said it was, and I got onto her hoss, with her up behind me, and we rode on acrost the desert. And purty soon we come

up to a run-down cabin, with a creek clost by, where a skinny, dirty old coot lay on a b'ar skin on the porch with a jug beside him. Only it wasn't creek water in the jug, but white corn likker. Jericho Jones plainly had a skinful.

He riz up when he saw us, and said, "Howdy, Rose. Is that there a man you got there?"

"Bildad Shane," Rose said, frownin', "and a friend of mine. See that you treat him as such."

"You bet," Jericho says, h'isting the jug. "Have a drink, Bildad?"

Which I done, takin' a Texas-size swig, and it was like dynamite goin' into my stummick.

"Jericho," Rose said, her hand on my arm, "Bildad has been fleeced by that wicked gang in Cougar Tooth led by my step-daddy Sam Quinn. He needs some help."

Jericho sniggered. "Yore step-daddy? Fust time I—"

"They took his guns and boots and horse, and set him afoot into the desert to walk to Red Grizzly, or starve," Rose went on, accidently kickin' the old hellion on the shin with her boot. "So he needs some help. "One thing though, he saved his thousand dollars, didn't you, Bildad?"

"Thousands dollars? So that's what you're—" Jericho jumped and cussed as Rose's toe accidently hit his shin ag'in.

"Could you find him an extra horse and gun and a pair of boots?" Rose asked.

"You bet, anything for a friend of yore's, Rose," Jericho grins, takin' another drink and passin' the jug to me.

He give me a long-barreled old pistol, then perduced some boots that looked like they'd laid out in the rain for years. But it warn't any use—I couldn't more than get my big toes into them. I could see I was doomed to go bootless, at least until I could get back my own foot-gear.

"That's too bad," Rose pouted. "Looks like you will have to wait till you reach Red Grizzly to get more boots.

"Onfortunately I cannot do that," I said. "For before I could get back, Hook Nose and the others might diskiver that thousand dollars is cached in them old boots of mine."

Rose jumped like she'd sot on a pin, and old Jericho, who was takin' a drink, like to of strangled. What I'd said seemed to excite them strangely.

"You mean," Rose asked, "that's where you hid your riches—inside your boots?"

"Better'n a thousand dollars," I said, "in hundred dollar bills, hidden into the soles of my boots in a secret place I had made 'specially for that purpose. And that's why I've got to get back to Cougar Tooth, bootless or not," I said, gettin' up. "Jericho, whar's that hoss?"

"Wait," Rose says, and she squoze my arm and looked up at me in a way that made goose pimples pop out. "That would be too dangerous, Bildad. The villains might kill you—and then what would I do? I've got a better idea."

I asked her what it was, and she said, "*I'll* ride into Cougar Tooth and get your boots. They don't know I've fallen in love—" She blushed purty as a rose, and said, "They won't suspect me."

"But what if you're cotched in the deed? No, I couldn't—"

"It's the only way," she declared, kissin' me in her excitement. "Can't you see it is, honey? I can slip into my stepfather's room, get the boots with the thousand dollars in them, and be back here before they're missed. Then we could go away—just you and me, Bildad. . . . "

Well, I was putty into her hands, so it wound up by Rose gettin' onto her hoss and ridin' fast back toward town, whilst I stayed behind and h'isted the jug with Jericho every few minutes. That likker must have had some panther blood mixed in it, for by the time we'd emptied the jug my head was a little dizzy and I'd become belligerent to the p'int of tossin' Jericho into the creek and takin' charge of the bearskin myself.

That made the old coot mad, and he crawled out and started cussin' me. "Think you're powerful foxy, don't you?" he asked. "Well, you ain't—you're dumb as mud!"

I laughed and said, "Foxy enough to skin Montana out'n a thousand dollars and a yeller-haired girl."

"You think Rose aims to marry you?" he asked, when he stopped laughin'. "She played you for a sucker, so you'd reveal where yore riches was hid—"

"That's a perfidious lie!" I roared, and riz up and flang the ol' scamp back into the creek.

But he crawled out again, fumblin' for his pistol, only he'd lost it in the mud, which seemed to infooriate him.

"You dam' idjit," he screamed. "She couldn't marry you if she wanted to, because she's Sam Quinn's wife and not his step-darter. It was all a scheme from the start, to find out what you'd done with the thousand dollars. She follered you into the desert, pretendin' to help you, to gain yore confidence, usin' Jezebel blandishments and honeyed words to gain yore secret."

I grabbed him ag'in, aimin' to hold him under the water till he ceased his scandalous lyin' about that sweet innercent girl. Only I didn't do it, drappin' him instead, suddenly seein' it all and knowin' he hadn't lied. I never heard a man beller so jest from being drapped into a bunch of prickly pear.

"Jericho," I said sorrerfully, "you are lookin' at a man with a broke heart. I been tricked and lied to and made a fool of."

Jericho crawled out'n the prickly pear, cussin' a blue streak. He grabbed a fresh jug from under the porch.

"I kind of like you, Bildad, in spite of yore dumbness and the shameful way you've treated me," he said. "You drink like a man. You've got a pistol there, and yonder's a hoss in the corral. What you waitin' on? Here, have a drink!"

Which I done, and as it went down such anger as I'd never known took hold of me. I riz up and headed for the corral where there was a big, hammer-headed roan and got aboard the critter.

I grabbed the jug from Jericho's hand as I thundered past, and then I was headed back for Cougar Tooth, where I arrove not many minutes later just as the sun was goin' down behind the mountains. I rid the length of the street, yellin' and wavin' the jug, just to let the scoundrels know I was back.

Well, sir, you'd have thought from the way the Cougar Toothers acted that warrin' redskins had attacked the town. Somebody screamed, "It's that manyac, Bildad Shane, come back to murder us all!" and the panic started. Some crawled under buildins, others dove through winders.

When I passed the livery stable, I heard an enraged roar which I knew had been made by Geronimo, and lookin' that way I saw that he had been tied with a stout rope to a big post inside a ten-foot-high pole corral out behind the stable. Geronimo had seen me cavortin' along the street onto this roan, and if there was anything that made him killin' mad it was to see me bein' friendly with another animal. So now he was rearin' and kickin' and screamin' bloody murder, and I knowed that if he got loose Cougar Tooth would think Judgment Day had struck.

I saw the buckskin Rose had been ridin' standin' at a hitchrack before the Boarshead Saloon, and I headed for there. Just then Bad-Eye Quinn come out of the saloon to see what the commotion was about. When he saw me bearin' down onto him, he turned a spotted color and grabbed his pistol, but I shot it out of his hand, and he turned with a terrified yell and dove back into the saloon where I heard a tur'ble racket.

"It's that murderin' monstrosity from Texas!" somebody yelled.

"It ain't no sech," I roared, firin' through the winders, "but jest Bildad Shane, come back to teach you the ways of peace and brotherly love. So come out!"

But they didn't come out, so I went in. What I saw driv me to the p'int of nearly losin' control of myself. The saloon was crowded, amongst which was Hook Nose, Bad-Eye Quinn and that Jezebel Rose. Most of them was crowded about Hook Nose, who stood at one end of the bar and was tryin' to pry the soles off'n my boots with a Bowie knife. They all turned kind of pale when they saw me standin' there without any boots or hat on.

"Bildad, honey," Rose says, rollin' her blue eyes and comin' to'ards me, "I knew you'd come to my rescue again! I tried to do what—"

"Out of my way, you—you deceitful Jezebel!" I said—and with a wild beller of anger I was amongst the villains.

A great cryin' and moanin' and cussin' riz up amongst the scoundrels, as some sought to lock with me in combat, whilst others tromped their feller men as they tried to escape my wrath. I saw Rose leave the room in a most ongraceful manner, through a winder, whether from choice or accident I don't know. Then I was too busy to see anything else, as them Cougar Toothers sot upon me with blood-curdlin' oaths and clubbed pistols and other wepons too numerous to mention.

One of the swingin' lamps got knocked down onto Beanpole's head, and I never seen a more peaceable-lookin' gent than him as he laid down under the bar. It must have made him tired, but I didn't have a chance to ask him, for ol' Hook Nose had clum' onto my back from behind and with foorious oaths was tryin' to carve me with his knife. I grabbed him by the gizzard and flang him, and it's a slanderous lie when they say I meant to drown him instead of bash out his brains. How was I to know his head would hit a beer barrel behind the bar and bust it, sinkin' him in a whooshin' wave of beer and whiskey from broke bottles?

By then I saw there was goin' to be vi'lence, so I sot about me with the boots which I had grabbed off the bar, bustin' skulls right and left. I never heard such moanin' and cries of anguish and terrer. You'd have thought they was in some kind of danger. I can't onderstand how the bar got wrecked, nor how that hole, about the size of a man, got knocked in the ceilin'. Anyway, they can't blame me for what happened, because all I wanted was peace and quiet, and my boots with the money into their soles, which I now had.

So I fit my way to the door and out onto the street, where I found more of the scoundrels waitin' with clubs and pistols and other trifles to do battle with. But I had more room here, and there was more cries and vile oaths and dust that riz up to the sky. And I resent sech accusations as that I meant to drown the town mayor by knockin' him into a waterin' trough.

I heard a tur'ble rendin' and crashin' up the street, follered by more screams, and I knowed that Geronimo had finally broke loose and was comin' to help me. He'd pulled up the post he was tied to, and tore down the pine log corral fence, and now he was tearin' along the street like the roll of drums on Judgment Day. That big post was still on the end of his tie rope, and he was swingin' it back and forth.

Well, sir, I never saw such sudden death and destruction as was visited onto Cougar Tooth then, never heard such moans and wicked oaths and screams as rent the twilight. Geronimo run the length of the street, bellerin' and kickin', then whirled and come roarin' back. He swung that post from side to side, mowin' down men and hosses, bustin' out windows and doors in the buildin's on both sides of the street.

By now I had decided to end the vi'lence, figurin' maybe the Cougar Toothers had learned the error of their ways. Besides, when Geronimo whomped me with the post in passin'—maybe because he couldn't see good in the shadders, maybe just for the hell of it—flingin' me acrost the street into a vile-smellin' alley, it irritated me.

I riz up in righteous anger and cuffed him on the jaw, and by the time he'd recovered to the p'int of knowin' what was happenin' I was into the saddle. We reared along the street, my boots with the thousand berries into the soles tied onto the saddlehorn.

"Good-bye, Cougar Tooth!" I hollered, ignorin' the bullets that snarled about my ears. "And next time you seek vi'lence and bloodshed, be shore it ain't with a peace-lovin' Shane!"

And me and Geronimo rid on into the wilderness.

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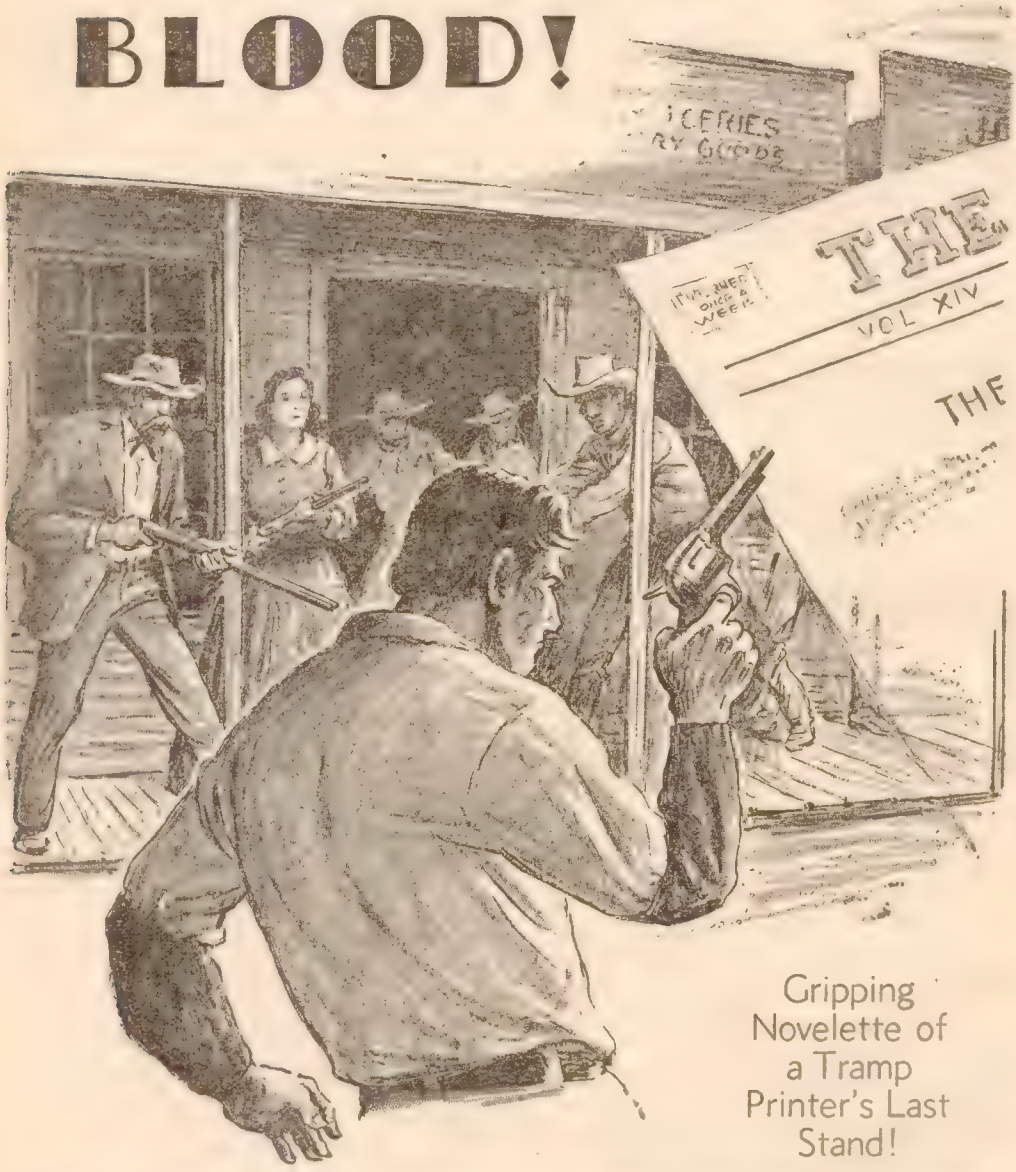

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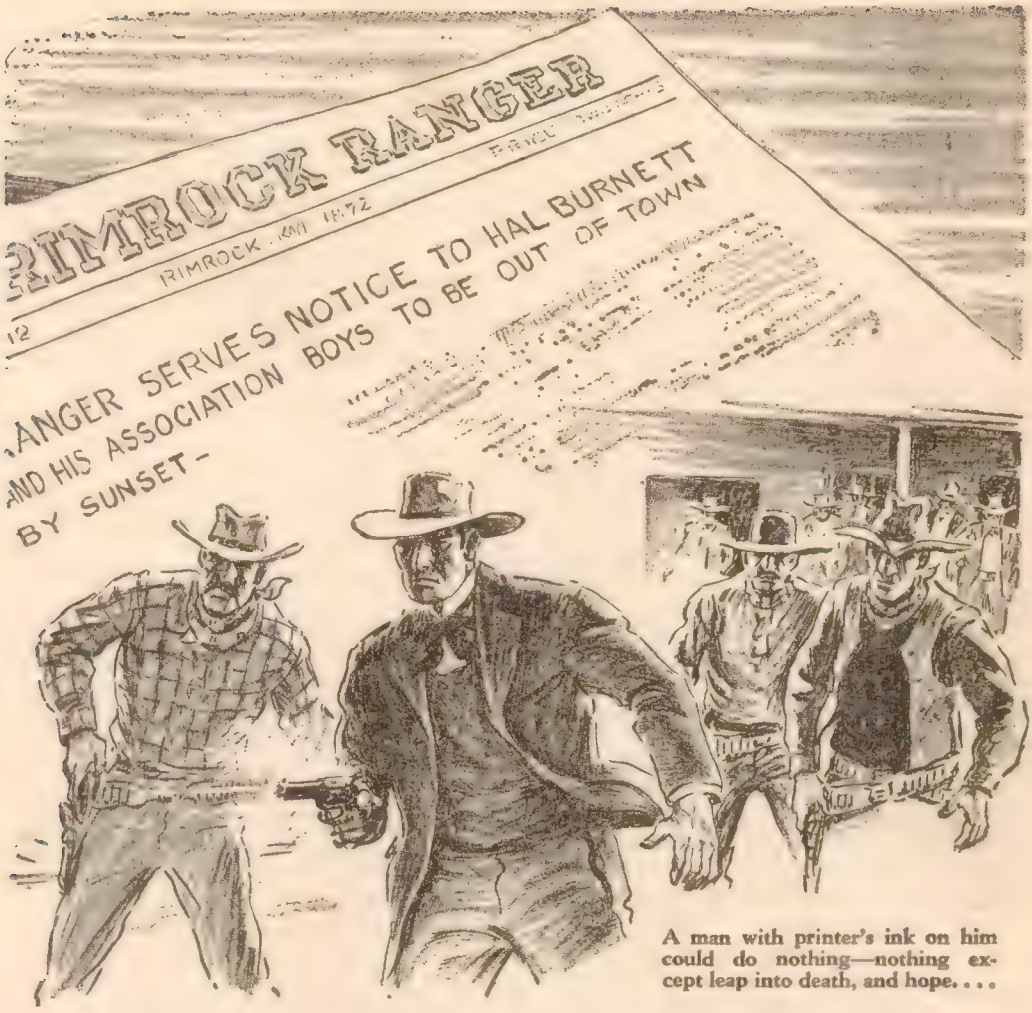

A man with printer's ink on him could do nothing—nothing except leap into death, and hope. . . .

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

CHAPTER ONE

Running the Devil's Press

ONE man starts out from knee-pants on with a grin on his face and his eyes wide, and he takes what comes, figuring on making something out of one thing or another as it comes to hand. Another man starts out from the same place with his eyes on something. He's not so apt to wear a grin, for he's taking himself and what he's shooting at mighty hard, and the way life goes, he travels a rocky road, at best. Adding back trails together, the man with the target—if he does reach it—amounts to something big. But the chances of his making the grade he's set himself are slim. Half of the world is littered with this kind—broken, derailed, and gone to hell.

That was Bill Shaw's kind and that was Bill Shaw's luck. . . .

* * *

It was a small room, neatly papered, with a clean, scrubbed smell and a ceiling which had been patiently mended with whitewash and putty so that the cracks in it were mere ridges, closed and scarcely noticed. Shaw stared about the room. The bright sun coming in the window hurt his eyes. It hurt

his head. It hurt all of him. But it had a warm feeling—a feeling that went back to a time when he had liked the sun, a time when he had ridden in the open and fished the creeks and slept on the grass.

It was funny that a nice little room like this could have held all the hell through which he had lived in recent days. How many days? He didn't know. A week. A month. He didn't care. And to whom did the room belong? Not to Bill Shaw. He was a drifter, a bum. He looked at his hands. They had a wide palm, with long, strong fingers. But the brown was gone from the skin covering them and the blue of the veins stood out through surface translucence. Bill Shaw had been on his last legs when a train crew tossed him off of a freight in this town. What town? He didn't know; he didn't care. He was still on his last legs, but to hell with it!

Shaw pulled himself partially upright on the narrow bed on which he lay. The effort sapped his energy, perspiration dampened his forehead and he felt dizzy. He began to swear, softly and competently. A door opened. A brisk little man came in, followed by a girl and an old man with a peculiar sort of stoop to his shoulders. The brisk little man was a doctor. He had a medic's important, fussing manner. He stooped and looked at Shaw. After a moment he turned and faced the other two.

"You're a damned fool, Paul Manning," he said brusquely. "Your pardon, Ruth. But it's a fact. This man has burned himself up. He's done. I can't pull him out of this. If I did, he'd drop right back into it the first time he could crawl as far as a saloon. He's not worth a nickel of your money or a minute of my time, Paul. He may be pretty young, but he's as good as dead."

The medic had not used a loud voice. Neither had he expected his patient to be rational enough to understand him. A twisted smile pulled at Shaw's lips.

"Doc," he said thinly, "what you say is likely right, likely the truth. But I don't like the truth—not about me. So I'm going to die? Maybe. We all do eventually. But right now, I'm apt to climb out of this bed and work over your kisser!"

The doctor looked at Shaw without alarm, shook his head, and crossed to the door. He put his hand on the arm of the elderly man with the stooped shoulders.

"I like to see a man do something for a neighbor down on his luck. I even like to go along. But I'm telling you, you're wasting the effort with this bum. I don't figure this is sound charity, and I'm going to have to bill you every time you call me in to see him. It's hopeless, and it'll run into a lot of money to even get him back on his feet."

The old man nodded.

"I figured on paying," he said. Shaw stirred under the covers.

"Charity!" he snarled. "A lot of somebody else's money to get me back on my feet? Damn the lot of you. I told you I wasn't dead yet!"

Grunting, Shaw swung thin shanks over the edge of the bed and forced himself unsteadily upright.

"Where the hell's my clothes?" he asked.

The doctor shrugged, glanced again at him, and went out the door. The old man, whom the doctor had called Paul Manning, crossed to the side of the bed.

"Ruth and I burned them," he said quietly. "They weren't fit for a man to be seen in."

"What the devil is this?" Shaw growled. "Why are you two drawing cards out of my deck? Or do you pick up every bum that hits your blasted little town?"

Manning pushed Bill Shaw back onto the bed and lifted one of Shaw's hands. With a blunt forefinger, he traced a deeply ingrained smudge which followed the rims of Shaw's nails. He smiled and displayed his own fingers.

"Printer's ink," he said gently. "If a man has ever rolled it onto a press, he never gets it off of his hands. And there never was a printer so gone to hell that the right kind of a job at the right time wouldn't pull him back. Ruth and I run the *Rimrock Ranger*. I was at the station the night three weeks ago that they carried you in there after a freight went through. I saw the ink on your fingers, so I brought you home and Ruth's been looking to you, since. That answer your questions?"

"Short handed, Manning?" Shaw asked.

The old man smiled and nodded. Shaw snortled.

"A hell of a way to recruit a hand!" he said. "All right, Manning. Go ahead and get me patched so's I can do a day's work and I'll work on your two-bit sheet till I've

repaid what it's cost you. But that's all I do. Not because I want to. And at that, I'll only set up job-printing plates for you. I'll have no part of your newspaper—down to one line of type. No part at all. Understand?"

Manning nodded agreement. Shaw thought he had something else to say, but the sullen anger which had raised him out of bed to answer the doctor was gone and it left him empty—empty and desperately weary. He closed his eyes to rest them from the light and slid immediately off into heavy sleep.

WHEN Shaw reawakened, a day had passed. There were other snatches of sleep and awakenings and other days. In passing they left him recollections which grew in number of brief, friendly visits from Paul Manning, of Manning's daughter moving in and out of the room with trays laden with sound meals, of the reappearance of the doctor, a little incredulous and loudly surprised at the progress of his patient.

They were difficult days for Bill Shaw, despite the fact his body was healing after the long months of too much drink and too little food. They were days in which he studied Ruth Manning's face, her figure, and her mannerisms and saw in them a reflection of the incomparable grace and charms Nita Lasalle had once had—charm which snared a man and held him and finally broke him.

In the little talk and gossip about the town of Rimrock, which naturally circulated about the publisher of the town's paper, he saw again his own first days in the office of the *Danieltown Press* back on the Ohio. Those were the bright, young, hopeful days when a man believed in the immunity and power of the press and his dreams ran to the building of a paper which could be neither bought nor threatened and which would have a name for honesty that would travel from the little town it served across a dozen states.

These were recollections. They were bitter, and so deeply rooted that whiskey could not dim them nor distance rob them of their sickening hurt. That Nita had married a rakehell, bullying gambler for his money and the *Danieltown Press* had long ago closed its doors made little difference. Recollections remained and they still rankled. Bright new world, hell! It was a stinking mess!

Six weeks after his arrival in Rimrock, Bill Shaw stepped from the Mannings' living quarters at the rear into the composing room of the *Ranger*, a typical country shop, neither neat nor orderly—so incredibly jumbled, in fact, that it seemed impossible a newspaper could ever be turned out in it. Yet Bill walked familiarly through the litter and dropped easily onto a stool before a type case. He was sitting there, watching the shop for Paul Manning while the printer went on an errand down the street, when the door opened and three men came into the office.

One of these was tall, his conservative suit encasing a frame about the size and weight of Bill's own in the old days. He had a pleasant face and an easy sureness of manner. The other two were typical small town lads, picking up a job of work where they could and not likely to be too careful that they always used clean tools. Shaw glanced at the man in the business suit and explained Manning's absence.

"I didn't step in here to see Manning," the man said quietly. "Matter of fact, I saw him leave a couple of minutes ago. My name is Hal Burnett. I understand you've taken a job with Manning?"

Shaw nodded. Burnett's smile became more pleasant.

"Then we should know each other, Shaw, and we should understand each other. . . ."

"You and Manning are friends?"

Burnett shook his head.

"Manning is a fool. One fool is enough on any paper. And being a fool won't buy a man whiskey or make him a stake to take with him when he hauls out of a hole in the woods like this town."

"I see," Shaw said. "You and your friends don't care for the way a newspaper spells your name?"

"Something like that," Burnett agreed. "I'd like to feel there was somebody in this office who'd keep an eye sharp to be sure the spelling is right."

"So you bring a couple of your boys with you to make sure I'm scared enough to see it your way, eh?"

Burnett's expression turned scornful. He ran his eyes over Shaw insolently.

"Paul Manning's stubborn and he sticks to his guns. We have to try scaring him if

we can. Nothing else would touch him. But you're not the scaring kind—are you?" Burnett's brows rose questioningly. His hand went into his pocket and came out with a thin sheaf of bills. He riffled through them. Shaw remained on his stool. He smiled flatly, without expression, and his voice was as flat as his smile.

"No," he said slowly. "I reckon I'm not."

Burnett laughed confidently, snapped the bills down on the counter, and walked out of the office. Shaw crossed slowly and picked up the money. He turned. Ruth Manning was standing in the door of the living quarters. He realized she had been standing there some time, that she must have heard most of the exchange between Burnett and himself. He moved down the room to her and extended the bills.

"Here," he said. "I figure I owe you and your old man about eight hundred bucks for hauling me out of something I'd been two deliberate years getting into—and no thanks to you. Here's a hundred on account against the eight. The faster I can get out of this town, the better!"

Ruth's lips were white and compressed.

"Yes," she said softly. "Yes, that's right, Bill Shaw. The sooner the better!"

CHAPTER TWO

Printers Are Proddy

IN THE old days, back on the Ohio, there had been times when flint had surfaced in Bill Shaw—times when he'd stood by the right of a belief and taken his beatings for it. And there had also been times when he thought maybe he was being a fool, when he'd ridden with the tide when it came along and taken his profit when it had been offered. And Nita—Nita Lasalle had backed him. With her eyes, with her lips. She had backed him strongly when there was profit to be made and she had laughed at him when he turned flinty and righteous.

This Manning girl was not so greatly like Nita as he had thought. Nita had never worn the peculiar expression which was on Ruth Manning's face when he handed her Hal Burnett's hundred dollars. Almost an expression of pity, of condemnation without blame. Bill Shaw, who had turned all gall and iron inside and who no longer cared for the look on any woman's face, was troubled by this girl's expression. He shoved past her and returned to the little cubicle in back which had become his room.

He was there when he heard Paul Manning return. He was there when Manning left again. And he was stretched on his bed when Manning came back and knocked on his door. He grunted an answer to the knock and Manning came into the room.

The old man had never been big of body. Years at a composing bench had shrunken whatever stature he had once owned. And time had thinned him into a little man with a pleasant manner, a quiet voice, and wise eyes. Not the kind of man who mixed in open violence. Shaw was astonished, then, to see that Manning had been in a battle. And he had gotten the worst end of it. His face was badly cut. His eyes were nearly swollen closed. His nose was a flattened ruin. Trademarks of a man handy with his fists and thorough in the work he did with them.

"What the devil happened to you?" Shaw grunted sourly.

Manning smiled crookedly.

"I corrected a mistake you made," he said. "I returned Hal Burnett's hundred dollars, son."

"You're wasting your whitewash, Manning!" Shaw snapped. "To hell with right and wrong. I gave that hundred to Ruth. If you returned it, it was your own money. I want no part of your troubles in this town. I'll make my own friends and my own enemies. I owed you eight hundred. It's seven now. And tomorrow I start setting type. When I've set seven hundred dollars' worth, I'm shaking the dust of this crossroads from my feet. I've got to be moving."

"Where?" Manning asked quietly.

"On down the hill with the throttle wide," Bill answered. "I'm bound to hit bottom pretty soon."

"Are you sure you haven't, already?"

Bill frowned. He shook his head. "No."

Manning turned back to the door.

"You sure you don't want to hear why Ruth and me and the *Ranger* are set against Hal Burnett in Rimrock?"

Bill shook his head again.

Manning opened the door. Bill called after him, "It would be interesting to know if Burnett mussed you up like that just because you brought his hundred back,

and for no other reason, though."

"Burnett?" Manning said slowly. "No. Hal keeps his hands clean. He just took the money without comment, then had a couple of his boys follow me down to the livery. They dragged me in there and handed out Hal's lesson. Trying to convince me not to corrupt you. It made Burnett happy to buy a friend on my paper."

"And you—?" Shaw suggested. "Maybe you'd rather write off your seven hundred and start me on my way, rather than have me hang around and risk sinking the campaign you're pulling against Burnett."

The old printer smiled crookedly.

"Son, you understand this. I'll give you a receipt in full for whatever you think you owe me anytime you want it. You can drift or stay, as you see fit. But as long as you're here, I think the *Ranger* will keep on printing the kind of news it sees fit—without any trouble from you."

"You ought to know better than to bet on a foundered boat. Don't you understand? I don't give a damn for you or your paper or this stinking town. The hell with everything. Being as sure as you are won't pay off, Manning. Quit hunting for ghosts. I greased my own skids and I want a merry ride to wherever I'm headed without any meddling fools dipping helpful fingers in my private pie!"

Manning looked blandly at Bill.

"If you're going to work tomorrow, better stow up some sleep, son," he advised.

Shaw stayed in his room for more than an hour after Manning left. He stayed until he realized he was trying to do what Manning had suggested—slide off into a nap. The realization that a quiet suggestion from the old man should influence him so strongly angered him. And there was a restlessness in him which he recognized. Clapping on his hat, he went out the back door without a word to the old man and his daughter in the *Ranger* office, out front. He went down an alley and turned out into the street. A few doors down he saw the gilt front of the Rimrock Royal Saloon. He crossed to this and shoved through its doors.

THE Rimrock Royal Saloon was a gaudy place, with sharp-faced men behind the bar and at the tables in the left half of the main room. With his restlessness converted to an open, familiar hunger for strong whiskey, he bellied up to the bar and ordered the most notorious brand on the shelves below the backbar mirror. He had downed half of the glass before he thought of money. He reached into the pocket of the pants Manning had provided a modest roll of bills at its bottom. He counted them and mentally added their value to the total he owed Paul Manning and his daughter.

The whiskey did not taste good. It churned in his stomach, reminded him that he had travelled a long road before he reached Rimrock and that the Mannings had only started pulling him back on his feet. Quitting the bar, he dropped down across from a blackjack dealer at an unplayed table. For lack of something else, he bought a small stack of chips with a bill from the roll in his pocket.

The dealer eyed him under lowered lids and dealt. Bill won. The dealer broke again. Bill let both stacks of chips ride. On the third deal, the man across the felt, apparently disinterested in this one-man play for small stakes, slipped a card. It was very fast and very smooth. But Bill had watched experts a dozen times in the past few months—experts who calmly clipped him of the profits from the sale of the *Danieltown Press*. And Bill had a way of remembering. He pushed back in his chair.

"Cocked deal!" he snapped as the dealer reached for the little stack of chips. "We'll take that one over again!"

The dealer looked up at him with bland eyes.

"You've made a mistake, brother," he said quietly.

"Apparently—when I sat down at this table!" Bill growled. "And I know just what to do to correct it!"

Coming up out of his chair, he bent above the dealer and jerked him to his feet. The dealer was small, but his weight was a greater burden than Bill had anticipated. He cursed the weeks of sickness and inactivity which had peeled him down like this. But he thought he had enough powder left to teach this splay-fingered son a mild lesson. He cocked a hand back to smash it into the fellow's face. As he did so, something which felt like half of the ceiling landed on the back of his head.

Shaw spilled onto the floor. He heard quick, quiet orders. He was lifted and

carried down the length of the Royal to a room at the rear. He felt a table under his shoulders. Somebody doused a bucket of water over his head. He sat up groggily. Hal Burnett was looking down at him.

"I didn't expect trouble from you, Shaw," Burnett said quietly.

"When I'm asked for it, I aim to oblige!" Bill snapped. "No tinhorn in this town or any other is going to clip me without taking a clipping in return!"

Burnett smiled.

"That might go for any other town, Shaw," he agreed. "But not Rimrock. Saloons in Rimrock, house dealers in Rimrock, business men in Rimrock have a guaranty against trouble. The small matter of a fee they pay every month is insurance that any trouble facing them will be taken care of."

"Like I was taken care of?" Bill asked.

"You were handled lightly, Shaw," Burnett said. "I need a friend on Manning's paper, and I'm still working on you. Otherwise you'd have come to out on the edge of town tonight with your pockets missing and maybe only half-dressed—if you had something on one of the boys wanted. We play that kind of game."

"Then play it with somebody else!"

"With you, Shaw. I'm telling you. And in Rimrock, my orders seem to stick. Something I pride myself about. Manning's a crusader. Red, white, and blue and holy as hell. He seems to have taken a fancy to you. Maybe he thinks he can make a man out of you—which makes him some kind of a magician. I know your kind. But with him regarding you as he does, you can be useful. The *Ranger* has got to quit riding me and my Protective Association."

"Your Association can't take care of itself?"

"It can. And if it has to, it will. But Manning and his paper have friends and if he was plowed out of the way, explaining why might make it a little rough on me and my boys. This is a trail-herd town. When the Texans hit here, there's money to be made. And I get my share. It's a smooth deal and I want to keep it that way. Ten percent of the gross of any business that works with me—those that don't somehow don't stay in business very long. Manning has got to quit working up talk over the Association. And if you work it right, crowding him and his daughter and making like you're converted to whatever he wants you to be, you can handle Manning. See that you do!"

A nice speech, delivered pleasantly in a manner only a man who bled a town as successfully as Burnett appeared to be bleeding Rimrock could afford. Shaw absorbed it. In fact, he thought, Burnett was likely right. If he turned meek and heeding around Manning, both the old printer and Ruth would likely feel they were getting somewhere with their misionary work and they might make concessions to him. And by the time he'd edged the Mannings a little too far, Burnett would have them involved enough to control them easily from there on. A newspaper which once sacrifices its integrity—even in the smallest matters—is powerless from then on. The public distrusts no one as completely as a newsman who has once involved himself in even the mildest shady deal. This was a thing Shaw knew with bitter certainty. He gave Burnett no answer, rightly assuming his silence would pass for agreement. He got down from the table and crossed to the door. Burnett made no move to check him.

Stepping out into the main saloon, he angled toward the blackjack table where the quick-fingered dealer was again seated. He stopped suddenly beside the man, hauled him up out of his chair, and smashed his right into the narrow face. The dealer was flung back into the chair by the blow. Shaw grinned wickedly at him.

"Tell your boss I'm travelling a trail he can't follow and I make my own orders!" he said.

Swinging on, then, he quitted the Rimrock Royal and headed briskly for the office of the *Ranger*.

CHAPTER THREE

No Crawfish for a Newspaper

FOR the first time in long months, Bill Shaw sat down to dinner with an interest in food which went beyond the mere necessity of keeping life in his body. He was hungry, ravenously so, and Ruth Manning refilled his plate twice with high pleasure up in his eyes. If Paul Manning noticed that his new compositor was eating heavily, he gave no sign.

Shaw's right knuckles were sore. It was a good feeling. That had been a fair punch he had landed in the face of the crooked blackjack dealer at the Royal. And the answer he had given Hal Burnett by swinging that blow had just the right touch of defiance and "leave-me-alone." In all, it had been a good day. He was sleepy and he turned in soon after eating, surprised at his feeling of well being, aware that his old mood should make him bitter over it, but untroubled alike by the surprise and the awareness.

It was hard to know how long he had been asleep when he heard the crash of a door coming down. He heard Paul Manning's voice raised in angry protest. The old printer's daughter backed him up. Harsh voices out-dinned those of the Mannings. There was the sound of struggle and the sudden slam of a gun fired at close quarters. Shaw piled out of bed at this. He was in the center of the room in his stockinged feet, groping for his pants, when his own door burst open. Three masked men poured in.

"That's him!" one sang out. The three seized Bill. He swung clumsily, failed to find a target, and one of the men pinioned his arms to his sides. For the first time since he left Ohio, he had a blinding flash of regret that he had let moods and bitterness force him into a way of living which stripped beef and sinew from him. If he had his old river trim back, three men in a dark room would have had a hell of a handful before they quieted him. As it was, they made short work of it. They nailed him up against a windowless wall. Two held him erect there while the third squared off in front of him.

There are merciless things in the world. Among the worst of these is a fist-mauling delivered to a helpless man by another who understands his work. The fellow started with Bill's head and face. When shock loosened Bill's knees and unconsciousness hovered close, he dropped his punches. He slammed carefully measured drives into the softened vee under the point of his victim's breast bone. He mauled the muscles of his stomach. And when Bill's midsection was knotted with agonized flesh, the hands went back to the face to finish their work there.

It took only three minutes of labor, delivered skillfully, to extract the maximum of suffering possible without causing Bill to go over the border of endurance into unconsciousness. When the two who held Bill pinioned freed him, he stumbled forward and fell full length to the floor. The leader of the three prodded him roughly with his toe.

"When Burnett gives a man an order, he takes it, mister!" the man said.

Turning, his companions falling in behind him, the three quitted the room and the house. Bill lay in a heaving, agonized stupor. Slowly his mind steadied and fought its way back past his own beating to the angry voices he had heard in the Mannings' part of the building—to the shot which had been fired somewhere in the house. With his breath steadied into a sobbing he could not control, Bill forced his knees up under him and teetered unsteadily to his feet. He had started out to find his pants. He found them now and drew them on. He was pawing blindly along the floor for his shoes when Ruth Manning came into the room and seized his arm, straightening him.

"Bill, are you all right?"

It was the strange senseless kind of a question one victim of a catastrophe is apt to ask another. As though the ruin in Bill's face and the hurt stoop of his body were not answer enough! Shaw grinned crookedly.

"I'll do."

"Quick, then, come with me," Ruth said in a frightened voice. "Dad's badly hurt!"

Bill followed the girl out into the hall. She found a lamp and touched it alight. They turned into Paul Manning's room. The door was wide. There was evidence of a struggle. Manning had apparently tried to prevent the passage of the trio along the hall to Shaw's room. Manning lay just within the door with a dark stain of blood creeping out across the floor from under him. Shaw knew without looking further that the shot he had heard had been fired into the printer's body.

He rolled the old man over. There was a bad hole high in his chest and he had bled heavily. But he was still alive. Shaw was surprised. Bigger men than Paul Manning had died swiftly with such a wound in them. Manning's eyes opened.

"Never take nothing without a fight—son—" he muttered. Shaw looked about

him. With his own body still cramping with agony, he doubted if he could lift Manning. Still, Ruth was so upset she could be of little help and the old man could not be left to die on the floor.

Stooping, he scooped his arms under Manning and straightened. The room swam before his eyes, but Manning came clear of the floor and somehow Bill staggered to the bed with his burden.

"Water—and get the lamp onto this table," he told Ruth. "Then get the doc."

The girl obeyed wordlessly. Shaw tore a strip of sheet from the bed. He slit Manning's clothes and cleansed the wound. He put a temporary compress over the hole. By the time he had done this, Ruth was back with the doctor. The medic removed Shaw's compress, looked at Manning's wound, and replaced the bandage without changing it.

"Looks clean and that compress stopped the bleeding. If shock isn't too high, I think he'll stand a chance. But it's going to be a long haul—" The doctor broke off, staring at Shaw as though seeing him for the first time. "You damned fool!" he breathed. "You've got no business to be out of bed, yet, and here you're fouled up in something like this! Why, man, you need a doctor as bad as Paul, yourself. Here, flatten out!"

Shaw tried to protest. The doctor roughly shoved him out into the hall and back onto his own bed. Calling to Ruth for some hot water and a bottle of whiskey, if there was one in the house, the medic went to work. He handled a curved needle like a saddler stitching up a fancy belt and holster. He poured a shot of whiskey into Shaw whenever tortured flesh protested too much, but he kept on working. It seemed an incredible time before he was finished. Finally he closed his bag and stood up.

"I don't know why I'm trying to save a face that'll be looking up at clods soon enough, but maybe you won't look so bad when those stitches come out. And I suppose I'll have to answer to Hal Burnett for wiping off the marks he meant to leave on you. If you think I'm making a joke, then you don't know Burnett. He don't like medicine interfering with his punishments any better than he likes the interference of anything else. I might swallow one man killing another, but I can't swallow what Burnett's boys tried to do to you tonight, Shaw. I hope some way you'll live to appreciate my hemstitching!"

Muttering to himself, the doctor picked up his hat and went out. Shaw looked at Ruth Manning from under swollen eyelids.

"He's right—those were Burnett's men —sure?"

The girl nodded.

"You're sure you have recognized them?"

"His three worst," Ruth agreed. "Larsen, Todd, and Cole."

"I'll remember those names," Shaw murmured.

THE doctor was back again when Shaw awoke. He looked critically at Shaw and finally grinned with the first show of friendliness Bill had seen in him.

"Some ways, boy, you come off worse than Paul. You haven't got a big hole in you and sixty years behind you to slow up the mending, but neither are you what I'd call flattened onto your back. You might as well get up and stagger around as lie in bed. Either way, those stitches are going to hurt like hell till they're through knitting."

"I'm satisfied where I am," Bill said grimly.

The doctor shrugged.

"Things don't stand still and wait for a man," he suggested. "They keep on going. You pasted a crooked gambler after Burnett told you to lay off. Burnett sent boys down here to teach you a lesson. Manning got in the way and tried to stop them. They cut him down and gave you your needings, anyhow. The town has heard all of this. And since it's like most towns, always riding a hope, it expects something else, now. At least some comment from the *Ranger*. I thought maybe with Paul laid up you'd want to be out front helping Ruth set up the issue of the paper she aims to run this afternoon."

"Ruth's setting type?" Shaw grunted. "What's she setting?"

"Why don't you go see?" the medic countered. "I can't read backwards the way you printers do and I've got to go in and see Paul."

The doctor backed out of the room. Bill rose and dressed. The doctor had been right. His face and the stitches in it hurt

him no more when he was up than they had when he was in bed. Tidying himself as best he could, he went down the hall and out into the office of the *Ranger*.

Ruth Manning was at the composing table with sheets of copy stacked at her elbow. Advertising copy was already locked up in the plates. She was setting the editorial contents of the next issue of the paper. Without a word of greeting to her, Bill bent over her and picked up the copy. It was in her handwriting. A mild, innocuous report concerning burglary at the *Ranger* office. Persons unknown, for reasons unknown, had broken into the office. In the ensuing trouble, both Publisher Manning and an employee, William Shaw, had been somewhat injured. The article wound up with the flat statement that in view of the previous night's troubles, the *Rimrock Ranger* was immediately subscribing to Mr. Hal Burnett's Protective Association, from which so many businesses in the town had profited.

Shaw dropped the sheets with a queer disgust tearing through him. Let the girl put any blasted drivel she wanted to into her father's paper. It was no concern of his. He tried to remind himself of that. He tried to keep that uppermost in his mind. But the disgust drove him and recollections of his own experiences on the Ohio forced words he did not want to speak from his mouth.

"You little fool, you can't print that!" he growled.

Ruth looked at him curiously.

"You trying to act like Burnett, now—telling my father what he can print in his paper?"

"Your father? Your father wrote that?"

"He called me in early this morning and dictated that whole article."

Shaw swore unashamedly.

"Then he's the fool! When this town reads that the *Ranger* has joined Burnett's tribute-collecting association, everybody will know that Paul Manning has caved. If he stiffened his back the next day, it would be too late. They'd always see him as one of Burnett's boys from here on. He'll be ruined—and the town with him. The only chance this town has got to break Burnett's hold is for the *Ranger* to swing and keep on swinging until Burnett's whipped. Your dad can't do this!"

Ruth Manning's curious look remained.

"I don't think dad was thinking of the paper or of the town, either. I think he was thinking of you, Bill Shaw. If the *Ranger* bucked Burnett over that deal last night, Burnett would think you were still bowing your back, too. Dad's down. He couldn't do much more to him. And even in Rimrock, Burnett wouldn't try anything against me, I think. So you're the only victim left associated with the paper. The next book the *Ranger* would run would be an announcement of the discovery of your body in the weeds beyond town. Dad was thinking of that."

"I don't figure your dad," Bill said heatedly. "He takes a bum in off the railroad tracks and gets him back on his feet. He gives him a job and offers to write off everything he's spent jacking this jigger up. And now, when the odds are highest, he's ready to sink his paper so save the bum's skin. It doesn't make sense!"

"It does to dad," Ruth said quietly. "The night they picked you up down below the station, dad knew you were a newspaperman. He thought you had once been a good one. Don't ask me how he knew, but he did. And to dad, a good newspaperman is worth more than a paper, any day."

Shaw stared at her.

"And what do I add up to you—bum or newspaperman?" he asked.

The girl stared at him a long time. Finally she spoke.

"I don't know," she said slowly. "I'm not sure. I don't think I've actually seen you, yet, Bill Shaw—"

Here was the place for a light answer, a careless shrug. Here was the place for a man to back off—for him to let a wounded old man and a scared girl wreck their one hope of ever having a lasting place in their own town. Here was the place where a smart drifter would let go of the free ride which had been carrying him along and let the ride go to hell down its own track.

Shaw grinned, a nasty, crooked grin, but it wouldn't stay on his face. Instead, his battered features turned somber and he pulled the girl off her stool and climbed up to the composing bench in her place.

"I think you're right," he said softly. "I don't think you've seen me. Maybe I don't even remember what I look like myself, any more. But we're going to find out.

And we're not going to print that crawling editorial! Get over by the front door. Watch to see if Burnett or any of his boys come along—and keep quiet. I've got an editorial to compose and I don't like interruptions!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Crawl-Belly Town

THERE was a good feeling in being back at a composing table. Shaw's hand shuttled with practiced steadiness between a font of striking boldface type and his compositor's frame. Manning's editorial, temporizing and fawning, had run to a lot of words. Shaw's mood was blunt and his statements were short. He called Ruth from the door once to locate him a cut to fill unused space. In half an hour, his page was ready for the press. The doctor came out from the living quarters.

"How's Manning?" Shaw asked.

"That isn't as important as how you are, Shaw," the medico answered drily. "Unless you're right, Paul's health won't make any difference. Good or bad, he won't live long enough to enjoy it. Burnett means business. He doesn't play long and he's fed up. The lid, I think, is coming off."

Betraying considerably more familiarity with a printer's trade than he had admitted before, the doctor picked up a sheet of copy paper and rolled it across the type Shaw had set. Peeling it off, he read Shaw's editorial. Bill's eyes moved over the familiar words, also.

The brief paragraph was headed: "The Story of a Crawl-Belly Town".

> There was a town which had no guts. It kept its head down while a soft-talking thief and some hired thugs held every businessman up for a portion of his profits and walked the streets like they owned them. A printer was roughed for holding his head up. After that, even the printer talked nice. There wasn't any law. Coyotes heard about it and began to come in. Trail herds didn't like the coyotes, so they began driving to other shipping points. In five years, this town turned from an honest place where women could raise their kids to an empty hellhole with half the fronts boarded and not a dollar's worth of honest trade in a month. This happened somewhere, but it isn't going to happen in Rimrock. The *Ranger* serves notice to Hal Burnett and his association boys to be out of town by sunset!"

The doctor read the proof he had run a second time. He put it down on the table. He looked at Shaw for a long time. Suddenly he grinned and whistled.

"Son," he said quietly, "I made a mistake. The lid is already off! Here, you'll need this." He parted his coat and hauled out an immaculately kept eight-inch Colt. He chuckled. "How many graves shall I order dug?"

Shaw met his grin.

"Four, I think."

The doctor chuckled again and left the office. Ruth Manning crossed the room to Shaw. Her eyes were deeply troubled.

"I thought you were finished with newspapers. I thought you weren't going to set anything for dad but notices and job orders. Dad was right, then. You are a newspaperman and newspapermen don't change—however much they want to!"

Shaw swung on her.

"Get this straight," he said sharply. "The right or wrong of this whole thing means nothing to me. If I ever was a newspaperman—the kind you're thinking of—I quit being one a long time ago. About the time I quit looking at a woman like she was something out of a sunrise or a sunset. Your dad picked me up—no thanks to him, but the spot he's gotten his two-bit little rag of a paper into is half-way my fault. Whatever else I've done, I've never left a place owing a man and I've got to see he's repaid, that's all."

Ruth's expression didn't change.

"Maybe you don't know that Hal Burnett won't pay any attention to that warning." She nodded her head at the locked frame of type. "When sunset comes, he'll still be here. He won't leave Rimrock."

"Not under his own power, maybe." Shaw agreed.

Ruth smiled, then. Not with relief, for her fear was still very evident. But a smile which had something to do with Bill Shaw. Shaw recognized it. Nita Lasalle had smiled like that a time or two. The kind of a smile that softened a man when he most had need for flint. And in its way, Ruth's smile had more impact than Nita's had ever had. But Bill knew where such realizations wound up and he wanted no more of a woman in the shaping of his life. Not a smiling woman.

"Get out back and look to your dad," he told Ruth abruptly. "I'll make this run and

handle the office. There's nothing you can do."

"Not even at sunset?" Ruth asked.

Bill shook his head. Ruth shrugged, then, and went into the back part of the building.

THERE are only sixty minutes to every hour and only a certain number of hours to every half a day. Shaw knew this well enough. He knew it was as true in the Territories as it was on the Ohio. But the afternoon ahead of him stretched out into illimitable distance in which the slowest movement was time. Every now and then his mind would jump back to the Mannings —to Paul and to Ruth—while he cranked the hand press and stacked the limp sheets of the *Ranger*. His mind went to the Mannings and their stubborn contention, evident in their treatment of him and their patient acceptance of his uglier moods, that they could see a different man than the one he tried to keep turned toward the world.

This kind of thinking disturbed him. He was rotten with drink; he was rotten with bitterness. A man had to have something he wanted to be worth a damn and there was nothing Bill Shaw wanted. Bill tried to convince himself of this, but in the end he failed. Maybe when he was tossed off the freight onto the cinders of the station yard at Rimrock, there had been nothing he wanted. But he did want something now. He wanted to see Hal Burnett and his thugs gone from this town. He wanted to see men with friendly faces on the walks. He wanted to see churches and socials and kids. Kids were the sign of a healthy town. He wanted to see big trail herds milling in toward the loading pens by the rails. And he wanted to see the busy activity of a street enjoying the business which came with the herds.

He admitted these things and then went on, trying to find out why he wanted them. There the stubbornness of his nature came up against the bitterness in him. Not for himself. There was still nothing he wanted. Or was there? That question kept recurring steadily.

Toward three, Bill finished the press run. He took the bundle of papers out and moved down the street to the hotel, from the lobby counter of which the *Ranger* was generally sold. As he moved back up the street he saw townsmen begin drifting toward the hotel to buy their copies. Among these were two or three with the sullen, mocking faces of men who hired for violence and did their work under the protective cover of a powerful boss. Burnett men. Shaw hurried a little more when he saw these men. The hinges of the lid on this town would give when the first page of the *Ranger* reached Burnett.

Once again in the *Ranger* office, he thrust the doctor's gleaming gun into the waistband of his pants, and he went to work on the furniture. The heavier pieces he shifted over against the door. Not so they closed the opening, but so they formed a series of hazards through which a man coming in from the street would have to thread. He turned his desk so that he had a wall at his back and a big type case sheltered him from the street window.

Ruth came in while he was at work. She gave him a lift with a heavy bench. He growled at her. She looked at him and smiled again. Then she went obediently back into the living quarters. Time moved along until it was after four and the office was as secure a place in which to meet Hal Burnett's retaliation as a man could make it. Shaw fell to waiting again.

He waited more than an hour. Ruth looked into the office once more. Shaw saw she had a short carbine in her hands. She looked keenly at him. Bill shook his head without a word, the gesture speaking plainly enough his demand that this be something for him, alone. Ruth smiled and backed out. A little later Bill heard the back door close and he judged she had gone out into the town. It was just as well and brought him relief. When Burnett did come, more than printer's lead would fly in the *Ranger* office and the partitions of the building were thin. It was not a part of his plan that Paul Manning or his daughter should suffer further.

However, in the end Bill Shaw did not wait for Burnett to come to him. From his desk he could see the low hills west of town. When the last rim of the sun dropped below these, he rose to his feet. There were two ways a man could fight. He could taw up his mark and stick by it. If his enemy failed to reach it, he could claim the enemy was beaten. Or, if he ran to sand and the quarrel meant something to him, he could go out and stand on his mark. He could meet the devil half way.

Shaw had not thought of sand in himself. He had believed since Nita and the collapse of the *Danieltown Press* had set him on the run, back on the river, that he had no sand. He had believed the way he wanted to handle this was to sit it out, waiting for Burnett. But whatever he thought, a compulsion stronger than his own estimate of himself sent him across the *Ranger* office and through the barricade of furniture and out onto the street.

THIS was the quietest hour of the day. He had expected to find the street empty—or nearly so. Instead, he saw the walks were lined with quiet men whose eyes picked him up the moment he came out of the newspaper's door. Men who had come into Rimrock with the hope of building something.

In front of the hotel Shaw saw the doctor. Figures were hard to separate at so wide a distance, but he thought he saw a woman behind the medico—a woman who could easily be Ruth Manning. He wondered about that.

Then his wondering was cut short. The doors of the Rimrock Royal Saloon parted. Four men came through them in a knot, followed by a loose string of others—the cogs and pawl-wheels which made Burnett's Protective Association go. The string of followers spread out and lost their identity in the crowds along the walk. Burnett and the three with him stepped down into the dust of the street and started steadily down it toward the *Ranger* office.

This was sunset.

Bill Shaw started walking, too. Out into the street, then up along its ruts. Walking easily, with every muscle in his body tense, but steady. With a feeling of elasticity in his stride. With his eyes clear. With all the sureness of physical control and sharpened senses which makes a man value his youth. The kind of a Bill Shaw who had set his life to the building of the *Danieltown Press* a handful of years before. The Bill Shaw who had seen Nita Lasalle and had wanted her and had nearly had her. The Bill Shaw who had broken in the middle and spilled out his ambitions and his pride until there had finally been little left of him but a whiskey-poisoned carcass.

When Burnett and his trio were thirty feet from him, Shaw stopped. Burnett made a little signal and stopped his boys. They were four men, looking at a fifth across a little strip of distance on the shadowed street of a town.

"Who wrote that box about a crawl-belly town?" Burnett asked quietly.

"I did," Shaw answered.

"It hung one on me, but it won't stick, Shaw. It's libel."

Shaw shook his head.

"There's something you should learn, Burnett," he said quietly. "A good newspaper only prints the truth!"

"Dead men can't print anything." Burnett murmured. He gave no signal, but the three with him, a yard behind him and a little to one side, tensed. A voice cut in from the walk. Shaw flicked a glance in its direction and saw that the doctor had moved down close. The doctor was carrying a heavy, double-barreled shotgun.

"We'll keep it clean this one time, Burnett!" the medico warned. "It's you and Shaw. Just you and Shaw!" The doctor's eyes touched Burnett's three men with sharp caution. Burnett smiled lazily.

"Goodbye, Shaw," he said loudly.

With the words, he snapped back his coat and hauled a gun free with easy smoothness. At the same time, his three men hauled at their weapons. So Burnett, Shaw thought, was right. This was goodbye. These were men who understood guns. These were men who had learned how to use them. And a man with printer's ink forever smudged beneath his nails could do nothing—nothing but make his gesture and lean into death when it came, holding his feet as long as he could and hoping that in dying he could accomplish that which he had not been able to do up to now.

These were swift thoughts, between the blinking of a man's eyes. Thoughts that came and went while Shaw's hand slapped against the butt of the doctor's Colt and hauled upward and out. Thoughts that were dead before the crash of gunfire sounded on the street.

The bullet did not hurt greatly when it struck Shaw. It shook him. It made him stagger. But it did not spill the life out of him instantaneously. It left him time to lift the gun in his hands with a detached slowness. It left him a chance to be very deliberate and sure. Burnett's first shot struck Shaw. His second missed narrowly. His

third struck again. And behind him his men were lining also. But between the second and third shots from Burnett's gun, Shaw had the doctor's Colt level and Burnett was there in the street beyond the blade of the front sight. And when the third shot struck, it did not shake him too severely. He had only to pull the trigger of his weapon. He saw Hal Burnett turn a quarter and take two long steps. He saw the man falter and pitch heavily onto his face. And he thought then that destiny could deal a hand to a man at any time. He forced his eyes from Burnett to the place where Burnett's three men had been standing. One more bullet in his body and he himself would go down. This was death and he wanted to be facing it when it came.

But Burnett's three men were not on their feet. They lay in a tumbled heap and he saw that the clothing about their shoulders was in tatters. Strange. He shook his head. Then the doctor was beside him with a shotgun still trailing a wisp of smoke. Two men started out at a trot from the walk toward the fallen three. The doctor shouted at the men.

"They're done—and good riddance. I gave them their warning, damn them. They asked for that buckshot and they got it!"

Then Ruth was beside him with half of the town. Bright faces, awed ones. And talk—it rang in his head till it made him dizzy and sick and he retched. Then it wasn't talk, but hands—hands lifting him, carrying him. Afterward, the pleasant smell of ink and unused paper stock and press oil. And finally the little room with the carefully patched ceiling, out behind the office. The doc had his gun again and Shaw's own body was patched, and the doc was going out the door with a big grin on his face for a medico who had just treated a man who had been shot to hell.

Only Ruth was left. Ruth Manning, with that smile of tenderness. It was a better smile than Nita Lasalle had ever worn, for it went deep and Shaw could see to its roots. But his old bitterness was not dead—not quite. He reached up and caught Ruth Manning's hand.

"Tell me," he whispered in a tense voice that betrayed his emotion, "would you marry a gambler—for his money?"

The smile widened.

"I wouldn't marry a gambler—for anything," she said.

Clinging desperately to consciousness until he could get this thrashed out, Shaw muttered another question.

"Then—then how about me—?"

The smile was blinding now. He could see only the smile, like an eight-column banner, clear across the room.

"I always figured I wanted a newspaperman," Ruth Manning said.

THE END

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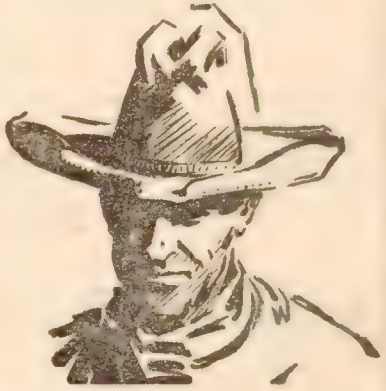

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I. O. U. ONE LIFE!

THERE are still people in Creek Crossing who claim he was the Rondo Kid. Others say he was a brother to Billy the Kid, with almost as many killings to his credit, and a few just say he was plain locoed. What all agree on, who saw him handle that ivory-handled six-gun, is that he had the slickest draw in the territory, and that for sheer guts and cool nerve he could even have been Wyatt Earp. Even Ma Melgrim, who claims he never killed anybody, admits that.

Ma was standing in the kitchen door on their little nester holding when he rode up that morning on a hammer-headed grulla pony, and the first thing she noticed about him was that he was just about the age of her Johnny boy at the time Dane Satterlee ran Johnny out of the country for cattle thieving. That would make the kid about sixteen, or two years younger than Johnny would be now if he hadn't got himself shot for horse stealing up Laramie way.

The kid had brown curly hair and a skin as silky and smooth as a calf's ear. He stepped down from the grulla pony and walked shyly toward the kitchen door.

"How're you, Ma?" he said.

For a minute Ma choked up and couldn't answer, what with him calling her that and his voice so like Johnny's and all. Then she saw his eyes. A clear bright blue they were, against the soft, silky tan of his cheeks. Even then she noticed how they never rested long on things close by, but seemed to be searching far distances—the snow-clad mountain peaks, the high-up billowy wind clouds, the swallow in flight. Ma didn't know that same day she was going to fathom the meaning of that gaze, and that strangely it was going to affect the rest of her life.

"Set and eat a bite," she said kindly, his nearness doing things to her voice. "You're a stranger, ain't you?"

"Stranger?" He looked surprised. "Why, no, ma'am, I ain't a stranger. I ain't ever been in this country before, though, if that's what you mean."

"I reckon that's what I mean," Ma said, smiling. "We call that a stranger in these parts. What's your name?"

"Some call be Chip," he replied. "And, yes, ma'am, I'd admire to eat a bite."

Ma set him a plate at the kitchen table and watched him eat. He was slim and of medium height for his age, and his movements and manners were as gentle as a little tabby kitten's. At his lean thigh hung a holstered, ivory-handled six-gun, worn smooth and shiny by much handling.

After he had finished eating, he carried his dishes to the basin and washed them clean and wiped them. "Now, what you got round here that needs doin?" he asked, as if taking for granted that he was to work for his grub.

Ma looked out at their eighty-acre creek-bottom holding, and the fear that was with her so constantly of late clouded her face. The going had been tough since Johnny went away. Pa Melgrim, like herself, was no longer young and he was ailing badly.

"Pa's in town this morning," she said. "When he gets back, we'll see. I reckon there's plenty needs doin', if you've a mind to do it."

"Why, yes, ma'am, I have," said Chip. "How's Pa's rheumatism been lately?"

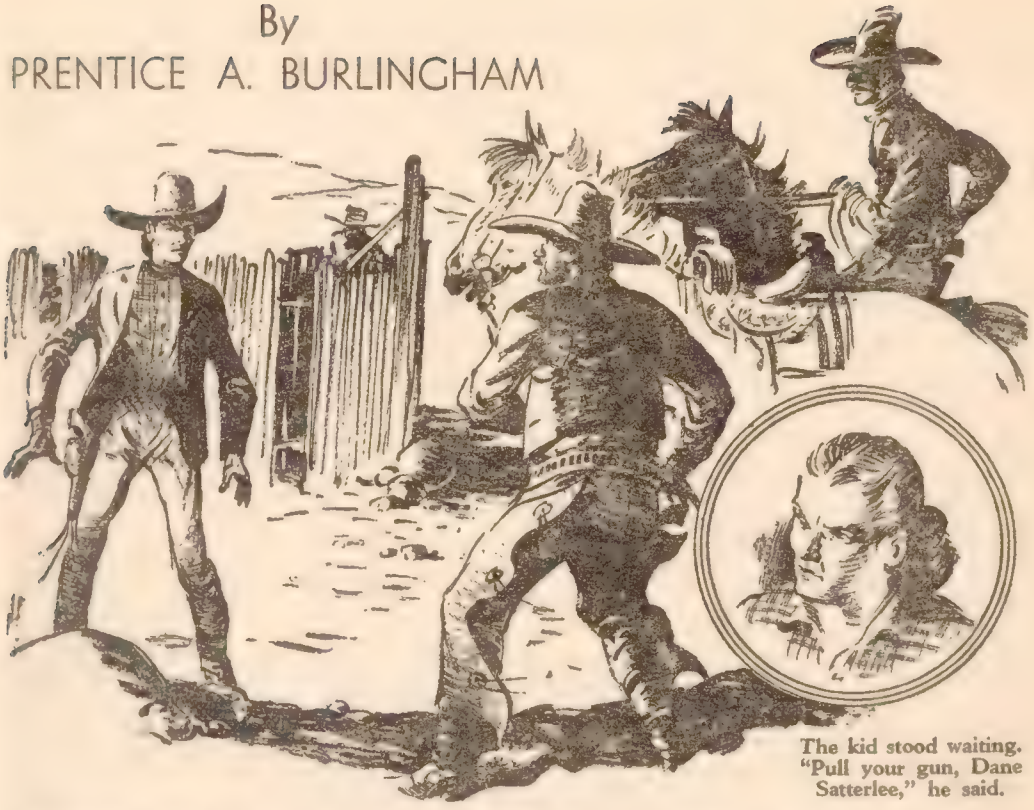
Ma gave a quick start. Not alone because he knew Pa was ailing, but because again he sounded so like Johnny. She watched him cross the floor to the window. He even walked like Johnny, and had the same way of holding his hands.

"Chip?" Ma's voice was hushed. "Did you know my Johnny boy?"

He was staring off across a saddle-back to where a distant white crest glistened in the warm morning sun, and his blue eyes were so bright and starry that at first Ma was afraid he hadn't heard her. Then he said very softly, "Yes, Ma'am, I knowed Johnny. We were saddle pards for near two years up Laramie way."

There was a sort of awe and earnest sadness in his voice when he spoke Johnny's name, and it was another link drawing Ma to him. Ma had not heard anyone speak of Johnny like that since news came of his death. She never had learned the truth of how he died—there had been so many conflicting stories. But now, as the burning questions rushed to her lips, Pa Mel-

By
PRENTICE A. BURLINGHAM



The kid stood waiting. "Pull your gun, Dane Satterlee," he said.

Eternity was in his eyes when the kid rode into Cross Creek to pay to Ma Melgrim the debt he owed her—a debt that he must pay with the last drop of his own heart's blood!

grim returned from town and the look on his face drove all other thoughts from her mind.

PA and Ma had clung with the tenacity of desperation to their little creek-bottom holding long after most of the nesters had given up and cleared out. But there had been times since Pa's health failed and Johnny went away that the fight seemed hopeless.

In many ways Dane Satterlee was a just and fair-minded man. But like others of his breed, he still claimed the God-given right to run cattle wherever the grass grew or the water flowed, and he was ruthless in his hatred of the hoemen.

Pa had tried not to be stubborn. He laid no claim to the creek bed, but built his fences well back from it, and protested only mildly when Dane's steers broke down his fences and trampled acres of corn.

But now things had grown worse. It was trouble over Dane's cattle that had driven Johnny out of the country two years ago, and last year these same cattle ruined Pa's entire crop, so that Pa had had to go to Ed Stiles at the bank in Creek Crossing and borrow money against the little homestead. It was to pay off this loan with silver received from the sale of his work team that he had gone to town this morning.

"Nate!" Ma cried as her husband came in the door now. "Whatever in the world's happened?"

Nate Melgrim was a pathetic figure of a man, with dry, shrunken skin and a face at the moment so haggard and hollow that it looked like a shadow. He advanced to the table without speaking or glancing at the kid, dropped a little pile of silver coins, and proceeded on through to the lean-to bedroom, dragging his feet on the rough flooring as if too discouraged to lift them.

Ma counted the coins, her brows wrinkling, and followed him into the bedroom. "Nate, you mean you didn't pay off the note?"

Nate Melgrim looked at her blankly. "Ed Stiles wouldn't take the money. Said the note was due yesterday."

"But it couldn't have been," Ma said sharply. "It was for three months. Besides, yesterday was Sunday."

Nate sat down on the bed and closed his eyes, as if trying to remember. "I reckon my specs played me tricks, Ma. Ed says it was for ninety days. Anyway, it's too late."

Ma sank weakly to the bed beside him and put her arm around his trembling shoulders. "It's that Dane Satterlee, Nate. I knew we shouldn't of borrowed from Ed Stiles. He always was in cahoots with Dane."

"They're all in cahoots against us nesters, Ma," said Nate. "I reckon we're whipped. We're jest too old to be homesteadin'. Tain't like we still had Johnny. Johnny would of known what to do."

Then Ma remembered the kid. "Nate," she said, and there was a new hope in her voice, "do you reckon God might have sent us another boy to take Johnny's place?" And when Nate only looked frightened, she told him about Chip, and how the kid was in the kitchen now.

But old Nate just looked more frightened. "Ma!" he cried incredulously, jerking painfully to his feet and toward the kitchen, "you left him in there alone with the money!"

It was Ma's turn to look frightened now, for when they reached the kitchen together, both the kid and the money were gone, and through the open back door they saw the hammer-headed grulla pony and its rider very rapidly disappearing over the hill.

"And he seemed like such a nice boy, and he knew Johnny." The tears stained Ma's faded cheeks and she sobbed, "I—I hoped he was goin' to stay. It was almost like he was Johnny."

Later in the afternoon, Ellie May Larkin tied her pony out by the barn and rushed breathlessly into Ma's kitchen. Ellie May was the school teacher in Creek Crossing and she had been fond of Johnny. Ma always looked forward to these breezy visits. The younger woman's freshness and vitality and wholesome, pretty face never failed to cheer her up.

But the girl's flushed cheeks and anxious eyes told Ma this was no casual visit.

"Ma," she cried, "are you all right? He didn't harm Pa?"

Ma stared in astonishment. "Who, Ellie May?"

"That's what nobody knows," Ellie May raced on. "One of Dane Satterlee's riders saw him stop here first. They're saying he's the Rondo Kid, and there are even wilder rumors—that he is a cold-blooded killer with sixteen notches on his gun. Dane Satterlee and Sheriff Bischoff are combing the country for him. You're sure you and Pa are all right, Ma?"

Ma assured her that they were, then told her about the money. "But who did he shoot, Ellie May?" she asked, and there was sadness in her voice.

"Nobody, yet," Ellie May's excitement increased as she talked. "That's the funny part of it. He didn't have to. He just walked into the bank at noon, when a dozen people were standing about, and no one in Creek Crossing ever saw anybody handle a gun like that before. Sheriff Bischoff says he's faster than chain lightning. He says Ed Stiles just gaped and turned over what he asked for, and nobody even reached for a gun."

"And he got away?"

"Yes, but don't you and Pa worry, Ma. He won't come back here. And they'll get him before dark."

"Oh, I hope not," said Ma. And as Ellie May now stared at her in astonishment, she told all she knew about Chip.

There was a softness in her voice as she talked, and gradually Ellie May's fear left her and she grew calm. And when Ma told how like Johnny Chip was, a softness crept into the girl's face, too.

"But he did steal your money and rob the bank," she said.

"Maybe he is a little wild," said Ma, "just like Johnny was wild. But you should of seen his eyes when he talked about Johnny. Ellie May, I ain't ever seen anything like them eyes. . . . "

A shadow had darkened the doorway and, looking up, Ma saw the kid standing there smiling as if he had never been away.

Beyond him, she saw the grulla pony tied up beside Ellie May's.

Ellie May drew back as from a ghost, but Ma frowned. "What's this I hear about you robbin' the bank?" she scolded. "And that wasn't nice of you, Chip, stealin' the money."

"Why, Ma'am, I didn't rob any bank," he said, "and I didn't steal the money. All I done was ride into town an' pay off Pa's note." He drew the canceled note from the pocket of his levis and handed it to Ma.

"And you did it at the point of a gun," Ellie May reminded him.

"Why, yes, Ma'am." He looked shyly at Ellie May. "It did take a little persuadin'. Wasn't no harm in that. I left Stiles the money."

Ellie May was commencing to feel what Ma had felt, and maybe it was that resemblance to Johnny. But it was the brazen nerve of him, and his casual way of regarding it that brought the color again to her cheeks and the admiration to her eyes.

"No harm!" she said almost fiercely. "And with half the country out searching for you! And ready to cut you down on sight! You crazy kid, now what do you expect to do?"

"I'll bet, ma'am, you're Ellie May," he replied with no fear in his voice. "Johnny always said you was a wildcat when you got riled up."

He had entered the kitchen and was fingering a threadbare coat that hung on a peg by the window. "Was this Johnny's coat?" he asked.

"Yes." Ma swallowed hard, and Ellie May came over and put her arm around her. The coat had been hanging there for two years, because Ma didn't have the heart to put it away. "Would you like to have it, Chip?"

He let his hand run over the threadbare sleeves, and his touch was as gentle as if he had been stroking a kitten. "Yes, ma'am," he said.

But he did not take it down. He was gazing out the window at a swallow, and his deep-set, clear blue eyes were far off. He watched the swallow as it soared higher and higher, until it rose above the distant mountain and became an indistinguishable speck against the sky.

Ellie May started to speak, but Ma whispered, "Hush!"

They were still standing in hushed silence when the sound of approaching riders reached their ears. The kid did not move. Ma looked desperately at Ellie May.

"Get him in the other room and hide him under the bed," said Ellie May. "I'll lead his horse down to the cottonwoods, by the creek."

Ma had no more than got the kid out of sight when Sheriff Bischoff, Dane Satterlee and a third rider galloped into the ranch yard.

"Where's that boy?" Satterlee demanded, jerking his iron gray to a sliding stop at the kitchen door. He was a heavy-set man with clipped mustache and a broad face that might have suggested character under other circumstances. At the moment, it was surly.

Ma did not answer.

"All right then, where's the note he took from Ed Stiles at the bank?" he said savagely. "We just learned that's all he did take, but this country ain't so wild an' woolly any more, that the Rondo Kid or any other brat of a kid can cut a shine like that right under the nose of the law, and get away with it."

Sheriff Bischoff, who had rather a prominent nose over thin, humorless lips, glared sourly from the corner of his eye. It was plain that he had come in for considerable abuse and ribbing because of the holdup.

It was plain, too, to Ma, that despite Dane Satterlee's blustering, belittling air, all three riders had a healthy fear of the kid, and were on guard. Satterlee and the odd rider had their hands clamped tight to their holsters, and Sheriff Bischoff wasn't even taking that much of a chance. He had drawn his revolver and had it resting squarely across his saddle horn.

Just then Nate Melgrim came in from the barn, followed by Ellie May, and Satterlee whirled on him. "Mebbe you think you can hang on to this wart of a ramshackle homestead by hiring gunslicks that ain't dry behind the ears yet, but you jest set the law on your tail. Where's that kid and where's that note?"

Pa went into a fit of trembling and looked helplessly at Ma. "What's he talkin' about, ma? Give him what he asks, if we got it, an' let's have peace."

"No she won't either!" Ellie May faced

Satterlee, and her claws were out. "The law, you say. You ran Johnny out of the country when everybody knows he was just taking cattle to pay back for the crops they ruined. And it was the same cattle that made Pa have to borrow that money. What kind of law is it that only protects the cattlemen?"

Dane Satterlee's face reddened. "'Pears like, for a school teacher, you ain't got much taste in the friends you pick. First it was that cattle-thievin' Johnny, an' now it's a gunslick bank robber." He slid down from his saddle and started toward Ma. "I'll jest see for myself what—"

He got no further. "Mister," came a clear, crisp command, "don't come no closer, an' you'd better drop them guns, all of you."

For a minute Ma and Ellie May couldn't believe it was the kid's voice. Satterlee stopped in his tracks and looked around to see where it was coming from, then he glanced back at Sheriff Bischoff and the other rider.

NOW it takes one brand of courage to face a killer you can see, and quite a different brand to face a killer you can't see. And that second brand is rare and the kid wasn't anywhere in sight.

Bishoff was the first to drop his gun, and Satterlee and the other rider followed suit without arguing. Then the kid stepped out the kitchen door.

His long fingers were wrapped around his belt, and nowhere near his gun. He came down the steps slowly, and along the path, eying each of the three in turn.

Satterlee was still in a half-crouched position and he started to reach for his gun on the ground. The Kid's hand sort of slipped off the belt, and as far as anybody looking could see, the gun just leaped up to meet it. The kid twirled it around on his finger about six times, and when the ivory handle smacked his palm it was already leveled at Satterlee's head and Satterlee hadn't had time to reach his gun yet.

"Now, git," said the kid, "an' if you come back bring some real gun-handlers with you."

As the three rode off, the kid just grinned.

"You crazy little fool," Ellie May cried, "why didn't you stay in the house? How many times do you think you can get away with fancy tricks like that? Now they will be back, and a whole posse with them."

The kid gave the ivory-handled gun a final twirl and let it slide neat into the holster. "Yes, ma'am. That don't scare me none."

"Well, it had better scare you," Ellie May snapped. This boy had warmed his way into her heart, too, and she didn't want to see him killed. "You think you're pretty slick with that gun," she went on, "but some day you won't be slick enough."

The kid smiled. "Johnny showed me how to handle a gun like that." If there was pride in his voice, it was pride in Johnny, not himself.

"Johnny wasn't a killer," Ellie May said shortly. "And besides, Johnny finally got shot."

She had said the right words, or maybe the wrong ones. Suddenly the kid sobered. His long fingers caressed the threadbare sleeve of Johnny's old coat, which they saw now he had put on before coming out of the house.

"I don't believe Chip is a killer either," Ma said quickly.

His clear blue eyes met hers. "I killed Johnny," he said.

Instinctively, Ellie May drew away from him, anger tinting her cheeks. But when Ma spoke, it was with the voice she would have used if he had been Johnny.

"I reckon you don't mean that, Chip."

"Yes, Ma'am, I mean it." He studied the ground, not looking at either of them.

"I don't believe you ever killed anybody," Ma said very quietly. "There's something unhealthy on your mind, son. Don't you want to tell Ma about it? You didn't shoot my Johnny boy. You couldn't of, because you loved him."

"Yes, ma'am, I know," said Chip. "But it was the same as if I shot him. He was shot because he took the blame for what I did, and I—I let him. It wasn't Johnny that stole the horse, it was me. But Johnny knew I didn't have a chance, that I couldn't —couldn't—"

"Couldn't shoot anybody, even to protect yourself," Ma finished for him.

"Ma, are you crazy?" Ellie May broke in, furious. "Don't you see he's lying? Don't you see now that he's a cold-blooded little killer?"

"Hush, Ellie May," said Ma. "There's some things it takes a mother to understand. Chip came here to take Johnny's place, because they were pardners. And I think it's real nice of him."

"I didn't intend to steal the horse," the kid pleaded. "I meant to pay for it as soon as I got me a job."

"I know you did, Chip," Ma soothed. "You meant all right, just like Johnny always meant all right. You were good boys. It's the things we can't control that gets us into trouble. The things we try to puzzle out, and can't." Her brow clouded. "But you can't stay here, Chip, after what happened. Dane Satterlee won't ever give up till he runs us out. He an' Sheriff Bischoff'll be back come daylight, an' this time they'll have dozens of men with 'em."

ELLIE MAY stayed with Ma that night. It took a lot of persuading to get the kid to leave, and in the end he went reluctantly. There were tears in Ma's old eyes as she watched him walk slowly down to the cotton-woods where Ellie May had picketed his horse. It was almost like she was losing Johnny all over again.

Next morning, Ma was awakened by a loud shout. Rousting Pa out of bed and calling Ellie May, she dressed quickly and went to the door. Her prophecy of the night before had come true. Dane Satterlee sat his big iron gray right outside the door and beside him was Sheriff Bischoff. Only this time they were covered by loaded six-guns and rifles which bristled from behind every clump, post and shed. The buildings were surrounded.

"Send that kid out here," Satterlee commanded when he saw Ma.

"He ain't here," said Ma. "He went last night."

"That's a lie," said Satterlee. "His horse is still picketed in the cottonwoods down by the creek. Tell him to come out with his hands empty an' high up, or we'll pump him so full of lead he won't float in brine."

Ma stepped down on the ground. Her face was ashen and she commenced to sway. Ellie May rushed down to her side. Pa came tottering to the door.

Dane Satterlee waited a tense moment, then gave a command to the men back of him. "If he don't come out in three minutes, set fire to the house and buildings. Get the stock out of the stable."

At that moment a slim figure moved from behind the barn door and the kid's voice said, "That won't be necessary. Let's you an' me settle this without guns, Dane Satterlee."

Satterlee had jumped from his horse and now whirled to face the kid. The kid was moving toward him, his arms hanging free and loose at his sides, that ivory-handled sixgun swinging a little in the holster as he walked.

Satterlee's face paled under the bronze. A score of guns were trained on the kid, waiting to take him if Satterlee didn't. But the challenge had been to Dane, and a code older than any of them held fingers taut until Dane made the first play.

The kid stopped about ten paces from him. "Pull your gun, Dane Satterlee," he said. "I'm waitin'."

Perspiration dripped from Satterlee's forehead. Ellie May hid her face and Ma screamed. Then it happened.

Those who were closest still swear the kid had his gun leveled a full second before Dane even touched leather, and Dane was no slouch on the draw either. There was just one shot fired. The kid's knees commenced to buckle. He went down slowly, rolled over on his back and was still.

Dane looked down at his own smoking sixgun and swallowed hard. No one there was more surprised than he was.

Sheriff Bischoff dismounted, picked up the kid's gun and tried to extract a cartridge. Failing, he tried to give the cylinder a roll, then attempted to pull the trigger.

Seeing the queer expression he made and sensing that something was wrong, Ellie May flung herself at Satterlee. "You murdered that boy, Dane Satterlee! He didn't have a chance!"

Satterlee grabbed the gun from Bischoff and examined it closely, his face going red. "Rusted solid," he muttered.

"You murdered him!" Ellie May shrieked. "You murdered the boy!"

Satterlee appealed to Bischoff, but got no support. "That gun ain't been fired off since it was bought," said Bischoff. "It's plumb wore smooth from handlin', but it

(Continued on page 97)

TOO MANY DEPUTIES

Those proddy Pesky pardners, Colonel and Corporal, picked a mighty peculiar method of protecting the Wells Fargo money shipments, when they kidnaped one deputy right out of the pokey, and worked over the other, with gun and fists, until he was plumb useless!

WELL, friends, it was this way: A couple of days before the fool holdup of federal cash, Corporal and Colonel pulled in from Bar B and at the same time the freighter's wagon hove up with a shipment of merchandise. Then the new deputy U. S. marshal stalked in. All of a sudden I was busier than a bareheaded woman in a grasshopper plague, a condition I am not overly fond of.

This new man, Crowe, was hovering in the background, looking like he had something more weighty under his fancy white felt than buying a nickel's worth of pickles. I was grunting and struggling with the boxes off the wagon, so I only flung a nod to Crowe, said "howdy" over my shoulder to the Bar B pokes, and kept on working.

The Pesky Mercantile Company, where Western Oklahoma Trades At, don't get a load of new merchandise every day. "No pitch game tonight, boys," I said to Corporal Fegin and Colonel Hudd. "Be with you in a minute, Deputy," I called to Crowe. "Ain't had a trace of Dandy Shriver lately, have you?" I added, just to make conversation. Dandy was running rampant in holdups and killings all over Texas and Oklahoma.

The new marshal elected to say nothing. I grabbed a box that must have outweighed the Bar B herd bull. "Gimme a hand with this calico, beanpole," I grunted to Colonel. "It's heavier than a barkeep's conscience."

"Let Corporal do it, Uncle Bud," Colonel moaned. "I'm a tired man. He's all bone and muscle, anyhow, especially in the head. Me, I run more to the intellectual."

Corporal bristled and stomped his boots across the floor. "Listen," he snapped in Colonel's face like a stepped-on bear cub, "You misplaced strand of rusty bobwire—I got brains in my Stetson corral that'd make yore gypsum-rock dome sound like two dewberries rolling around in a hollow gourd. Why you long—!"

"No fightin' today, boys, dad-rat it!" I yelled. "The store's mussed up enough as it is. Now help me tote this stuff!"

Crowe just looked on, thumbs in his belt, like he didn't want to get his good clothes dirty. The marshal had come to town only the day before. Showed up at the stage line office, presented his credentials to old Eddie Jones, and showed him a letter from the new stage company. It said Crowe was to take over all responsibility for guarding the government money when it stayed over in Pesky between stage runs to Texas. Old Eddie was humiliated into a flaming rage, because he figured he was still young and spry enough, and handy enough with his old double-barrel, to guard the money just as well as anybody else, including a federal badge-toter. Reckon Eddie was turning sensitive with the years.

The two fightin' cowpokes from Bar B gave me a hand, and when we got a breathing spell the deputy narrowed his eyes at me and fingered his badge. He jerked his head significant toward my two friends.

"Like to talk to you in private a minute, Mister McDonald," he said. "Reckon your little do-gooders would mind moving on down the street"

At that, the gangling Colonel Hudd reached up, swept off his sweaty skypiece, and made a low, gawky bow to the law. "I am pleased to have met you, Yore Honor," he said. "If you desire that we shall vamoose, then—we shall vamoose."

"Cut out the horsin'," gritted Corporal Fegin, dignified, giving Colonel a kick while he was bent over. "Where's yore manners?" He turned to the deputy. "Excuse the crudeness of my beanpole associate," Corporal said meekly. He stepped a pace nearer and eyed the marshal's badge, looking close. "Man, that's sure a pretty ornament you got! Solid silver, ain't it?"

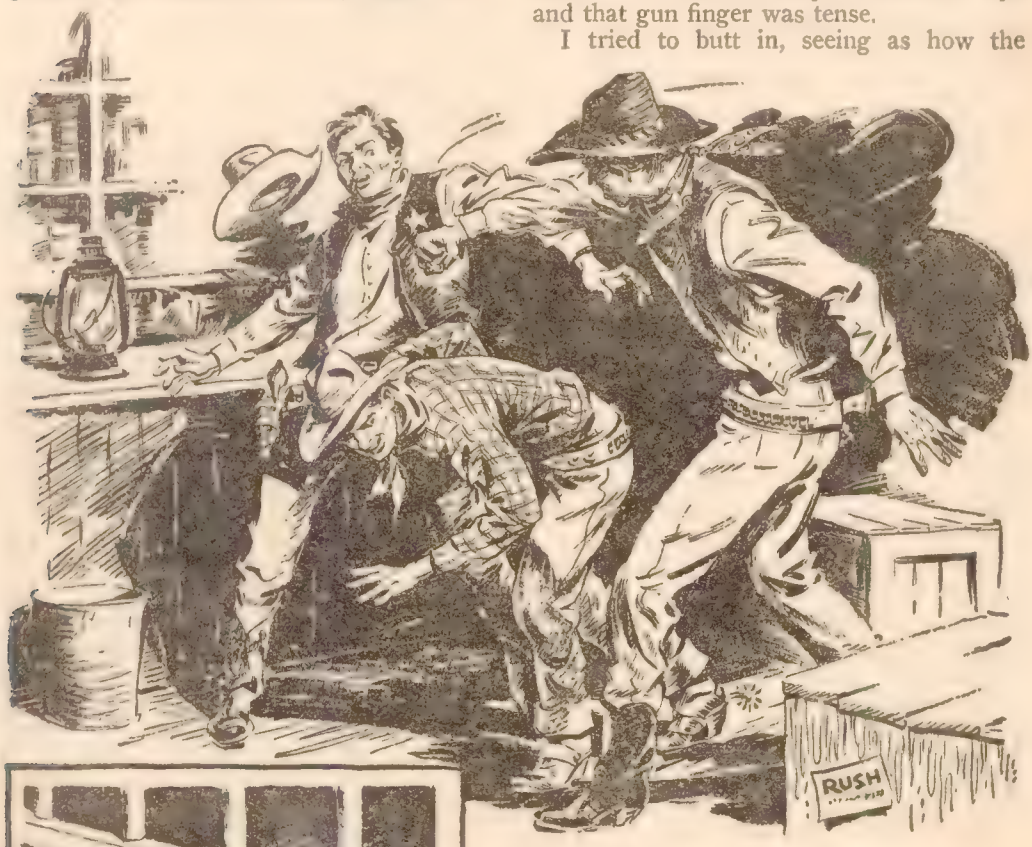
The marshal backed up a step. I could see he wasn't liking this horse-play. Just then Colonel, who must have been outraged

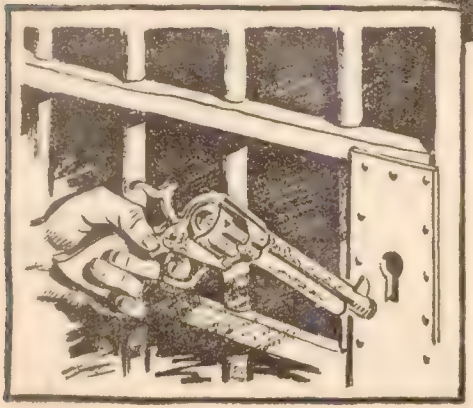
by the kick in the pants, was advancing on Corporal and winding up for a swing. I hollered, but I was a second too late. At least for Crowe. Squatty little Corporal heard me and ducked, but Crowe was caught off guard. The haymaker that Colonel had aimed for the back of Corporal's ear went over his head and landed plunk on the marshal's jaw. Colonel wasn't putting much into the swing, which was lucky for Crowe. He staggered and grunted and shook his head, dazed for a second, and rubbed his jaw. But I saw what looked like mad murder shoot up in his eyes for that second. Corporal and Colonel both nearly fell all over each other apologizing.

Before I knew what to do about it, all at once Crowe had a gun in his hand. The man was plenty fast. His mouth was in a mean snarl.

"Get out of here—both of you! Grab leather for hell and gone—and don't come back!" He had a nasty look in his eye and that gun finger was tense.

I tried to butt in, seeing as how the





Colonel wasn't puttin' much in the swing, which was mighty lucky for Crowe.

thing might get serious in another minute. That Bar B pair don't take much ordering around. "They ain't got no sense," I apologized to Crowe, stepping between them. "Always fightin' one another—except, of course, when somebody else starts trouble with one of them. Then it's like two sticks of dynamite in a tin cistern.

But they didn't mean no harm to you."

"I ain't interested," Marshal Crowe retorted, still angry, but seeming to cool a mite. "I'm here to talk business, McDonald. I don't want any more truck with these two tramps. Get 'em out of my sight before I put 'em in the calaboose and throw away the key."

"Now, just a minute, deputy," I cut in. "I hate to admit it, but these here dudes are friends of mine." Corporal and Colonel were standing to one side, looking meek, but I knew them too well—their brains were functioning. "Course, they look like they're about two jumps ahead of a posse, and they ain't got much gumption for anything but rough-housing. And I hear they got shot up a right smart in the Indian wars, fighting with the Army out in Dakota—and just forgot to die. But they're supposed to be about the top hands in the Pesky country. And they play a pretty fair game of pitch up to my diggings once in a while. So I reckon I can vouch for them, deputy. Anything you got to say to me is safe for them mule-ears to hear."

"It can keep," Corporal put in. "Anyway, Uncle Bud, you got work to do. We'd been in from the ranch earlier but this here long-legged road-runner has to ride off the trail all the time, huntin' and pickin' them wild dewberries. Sometimes I hate to see the berry season come around, he's such a glutton."

The Bar B pair eased out.

Then the marshal gave out with what he'd come to say. He wanted the use of my big wood strongbox to keep the government money in, when the shipment stayed overnight in Pesky. Ever so often, federal currency was being shipped south into Texas for the payroll of a few troops stationed down there.

"Old Eddie Jones, he ain't much protection," Crowe said, a little contemptously, I thought. He fixed his hat, just so. Crowe was a big man, fancy dressed, sharp eyes. Eddie Jones was a skinny old Oklahoma fossil with a game leg.

"He ain't got a thing in that little office to lock the money in," Crowe said. "He told me about your wooden chest there. It ain't no bank vault, but I reckon it's the nearest thing to a safe in Pesky. I'll be setting up with it, anyhow, on guard at night."

I noticed what looked like berry stain on the marshal's vest, and was wondering if he got it on himself, or if Corporal had, when he looked so close at the badge.

"With Dandy Shriver on the warpath," I remarked, "that wouldn't be no bad idea."

"Main reason I'm here to keep an eye on the money." Crowe gave his gun a pat. "That Shriver, from what I hear, is bad medicine."

"He is and he ain't," I offered. "He's a back-shootin' kind of lizard. Never really pulled a job where he faced a man straight to. Never gives 'em a look. I say a skunk like that's dangerous, all right—but no guts."

I told the new marshal he was welcome to lock the money in the box, which I use for odds and ends of valuables around the store. The thing wasn't no cinch, as the marshal said, but it was a lot better'n having the government money laying around that broomweed of a shack where Eddie officed.

LATER in the evening, about closing time, Eddie Jones came limping into the store, bellyaching till the air was purple about how the government and the stage company didn't trust him to take care of the money shipments.

"Sent me word this man Crowe was coming to take charge of it between runs," he spewed. "Derned insulting, I calls it."

"Keep yore shirt-tail in, Eddie," I consoled. "You ain't no spring chicken any more, or me either, for that. You ain't got no safe, and you ain't rugged enough to stave off a bandit, say like Dandy Shriver. And you ought to be glad this new marshal can do the worrying. What you got to holler about?

"It's the principle of the thing," he yelped. "Like I was telling Corporal and Colonel while ago, it's like—"

"Them Bar B idjits?" I put in. "Thought they headed for the ranch long ago. Notice their horses are gone from out front. What were they doing at your place?"

"Just loafing and passing the time of day." Eddie grunted. "We just fell to talking and I told how the new marshal was going to use your strongbox for a safe when the money was in town."

"There ain't," I said then, "no particular

good reason ever buzzard in the Pesky territory should know about the money. Drat it—this was supposed to be confidential, Eddie. Now skiddaddle. I got to close up this here emporium of calico, pinto beans, and money safeguarded while you wait."

I was busy as a windmill in a cyclone next day, and didn't even get to stick my head out to see the north stage roll in. After a while the door busted open like a wild horse coming out of a weak stall, and Corporal and Colonel exploded inside.

"Go get the deputy marshal, Uncle Bud," Colonel spewed, wiping berry juice on his moth. "We just heard Dandy Shriver was seen in this country!"

"Why don't you get him yoreself?" I retorted.

"He wouldn't listen to us, probably," pleaded Corporal. "Hurry, Uncle Bud—he'll come with you. Think he's down at Eddie Jones' office now. Anyhow, we don't want to tell him in front of old Eddie—might get Eddie all excited."

It didn't sound exactly right, but after a couple of looks at those grim faces, I went. I found the marshal all right, and the money was there, too, having been unloaded off the stage. It was in two big packages, done up fancy, with a lot of red official-looking sealing wax.

Crowe left the packages with Eddie Jones and hurried over to the store. Corporal and Colonel told him about how a hand on Bar B had sighted a rider in the Washita Hills—a rider he took to be Dandy Shriver.

"This rider was a stranger," Colonel said. "Our man from Bar B has seen Shriver in Texas, long time ago. Says he's sure. The rider acted strange. Disappeared in the brush soon as he was sighted. Our man never got close up—didn't try to, either! But it sounded suspicious and we figured you ought to know."

The marshal fingered his gun and eyed the three of us.

Then he laughed shortly. "Kinda makes your flesh creep, eh—knowing Shriver's around? Well, don't worry, you two tinhorns. You just hang close around your home corral. If Shriver comes this way, I'll take care of him!"

Before Corporal and Colonel could rise to that, I changed the subject and tried to make other conversation. The deputy allowed that the money was in town, and that he would want the use of my strongbox overnight.

"Help yourself," I grunted. "Tired o' hearin' about the danged money. Tired o' hearin' about Dandy Shriver. Just tired. Been in this Pesky country too danged long."

"Reckon the troops down in Texas are gonna get their tequila money before many moons," drawled Colonel, not paying me no attention. He was idly flipping his long-bladed knife at the floor. "Kinda makes me wish I was back fightin' again, with the cavalry. Instead," he frowned at Corporal and put up his knife, "o' ridin' herd on a bunch of devilish Oklahoma cattle alongside this dehydrated parcel of abandoned camp litter that goes by the name of Corporal Fegin."

Before they got to slugging right there on the floor I yelled "Calm down, behave yoreselves, and shet up! And Colonel, wipe yore chin. Corporal, you short-change piece of rawhide, don't be so infernal quick on the trigger. Can't you have a little respect for the deputy marshal here? Now let's move over to my house and get started on that pitch game. I got a pot of chili on the back of the stove and a dozen bottles of beer getting cold in the well bucket."

I tossed the keys to Crowe. "It's all yours, deputy," I said. I told him how the strongbox lock worked, and also the store doors. He said Eddie Jones was to sit up on guard till midnight, then he would relieve Eddie for the rest of the night. Me and Corporal and Colonel went up the hill to my diggings and got busy with a deck and the beer.

NEXT morning was just like any other day to me—for the first half hour. Pesky was getting pink in the east, and an Oklahoma breeze was tickling the postoaks at the windmill tank. I felt pretty good, having trimmed those Bar B dudes in the card game which we had played past midnight. Any evening with those two locoed tamales is bound to be as lively as a flash flood on the Washita in round-up time. I made myself a pot of coffee you could smell plumb to Springfield and fried a slab of bacon and three eggs. By good sunup I was opening the store door.

The door was unlocked. And that

wasn't all. First thing that met my eyes was the door of the strongbox—standing wide open. And there was nothing in it that looked like two packages of Army currency.

Deputy Marshal Crowe, who was supposed to have taken over the guard job from Eddie Jones at midnight, was nowhere in sight.

I ran out the front door and yelled a couple of times for Eddie. But there was no answer. I ambled down the alkali street to his shack office and looked inside. It was empty.

That puzzled me, since old Eddie was an early bird too—always took pride in beating me down by half an hour or so. I didn't like the looks of it and was wishing Corporal and Colonel were around.

I wasn't back in the store more than two minutes till I heard a commotion out front. A horse skidded up, and then there was Crowe plowing in the door like a blind bull. His eyes were fire red and ugly, and the set of his mouth didn't look good to me. His clothes were mussed up. Looked like a man that had a lot on his mind—all mean.

"What happened?" I squawked. "Where's Eddie this morning? Where's the money? Where's—

Crowe shoved me aside, rough-like, and that made me bristle. He stalked over to the strongbox and rooted through it, messing the stuff up still more, like he was hunting something that he knew ought to be there and wasn't.

"Eddie Jones is in the calaboose," he gritted then, stalking up and talking in my face. He had murder in his eyes if I ever saw it. "There wasn't any money! he snarled. "Those packages were fakes! Somebody switched 'em! And I got a bead ready for the man that did it!"

"You mean the real money's gone?" I gasped. "What's Eddie locked up for? He ain't—"

"I'm taking no chances on that old snake," snapped Crowe. "Where's that pair of broken-down busters that hung around you, name of Corporal and Colonel? I got an idea—"

Before I could answer that, the sound of one sixgun shot came from somewhere off in town. We listened, then we heard horses running, far off. Crowe shoved me aside for the second time. On the porch we looked, and there was a man running up the street, our way. When he got in hollering distance he yelled, "Corporal Fegin and Colonel Hudd just shot the lock off the calaboose door and rode off with Eddie Jones!"

Crowe exploded some language that churned the air.

He turned on me. The man looked hog-wild with rage. "Where will they go?" he snarled. He grabbed me by the shoulder. "Come on—speak up! They're friends of yours— Which way will they head? They've stole that money! I'll run 'em down if it's the last thing I ever do! You might of had a hand in it yourself, you old buzzard, for all I know." For a minute I thought he was going to let me have it then and there. Plenty of murder in those red eyes.

"How would I know which way they went?" I snapped. I was getting fed up. "And no need to be accusin' everybody in Pesky till you know the lay of the land, Deputy. Take it easy—what's this all about? How come you found out the money packages were fakes?"

This seemed to trip him for a minute. He just looked at me and around at the little crowd that had gathered, glaring like he was a mind to plug the lot of us just for luck.

Suddenly he whirled and shouldered his way through us and stalked through the battered gates of the Pesky Bar. I hated to think what frame of mind he might be in after a couple of shots of Pesky Special under his belt—he was crazy mad enough to begin with.

I left the little knot of early-risers mumbling among themselves and went back into the store. Things were happening a little too fast for me. The Pesky Mercantile Company ain't used to such commotion, anyhow not so early in the morning.

I DON'T know how I got the idea—reckon a hunch just hit me. But I couldn't see Eddie Jones riding clear out of the country with Corporal and Colonel, nor even as far as Bar B ranch. No reason for it. So I jerked my hat down and took a look outside. Crowe must have still been feeding his rage at the bar. He wasn't in sight. I made a bee-line out the side door to my shack up the hill.

My hunch was right. Inside my diggings,

sprawled about like they had no worry in the world, were Corporal Fegin and Colonel Hudd and old Eddie Jones.

"What the dad-ratted double helpus is goin' on here?" I stormed. "This all you got to do, you three fugitives from a man-killin' U. S. marshal? Don't you know that lead-slinger's after you all with blood in his eye and mayhem in his holster? What, for the love of Kansas, is going on, anyhow?"

Corporal looked at Colonel and jerked his head toward me. "Do you know this here gentleman, Colonel Hudd?" he asked politely.

Colonel looked at me like he never saw me before. "I am sorry, Corporal Fegin," he said. "This man is a total stranger to me. Sir, do you have business here? This here's a private dwelling, you know."

I ain't a cussing man as a rule, but I ain't forgot how. When I got through, Corporal and Colonel were sitting straight up with admiration, and Eddie Jones was laughing all over, so I heaved the coffee pot at him.

"Fake money in the government package! My strongbox empty! Eddie in the calaboose and you two shootin' him out! Crowe ready to kill all three of you on sight—and you got time to make jokes!" I bawled 'em out proper.

"Fake money?" Colonel unfolded and got up. "Goodness me, Uncle Bud—now how would the deputy know it was fake? Unless, of course, he tore into it, seals and all, to take a look?"

We heard a horse loping toward the house. Corporal and Colonel looked at one another and motioned us back. Their guns were ready. They took a cautious look out the window, then went to the door.

The rider was a man from Bar B. He came up on the porch and said something in a low voice to Corporal and Colonel. All three of them chinned for a minute.

I overheard a few words. "Name is Crowe, all right," the rider was saying. "He's conscious enough to say that."

Corporal and Colonel were riding off before Eddie and me knew what happened. The Bar B man rode off in one direction, and the tall and the short waddies rode like they were headed for my store.

"Come on," I hollered to Eddie.

"That fake money," Eddie said, short-winded as we hurried, "well, Corporal and Colonel found it in the deputy's room where he opened the packages some time last night."

We rounded a house in the edge of town and could see commotion in front of my store. Looked like Crowe was getting on his horse in a hurry, and even at that distance we could tell he was handling a sixgun. A cloud of dust we took to be Corporal and Colonel was moving straight toward Crowe from a block or two away. The deputy whirled like he meant to meet it, then seemed to change his mind. While we gawked with our mouths open, he whirled his horse the other way and lit out. Corporal and Colonel kept closing up, hell for leather. We saw Crowe turn in the saddle and throw two shots back, quick, at the cloud of alkali. People were scattering for cover. It was the dangdest race Pesky ever saw. The chase disappeared off into the thick mesquite brush and broomweeds over toward the old deserted cowpens on the north edge of town.

Everybody followed cautiously, some afoot, some riding, all a-scared to go on very fast, but set on not missing anything. It sounded like a full-grown war had broken out over there. Eddie and me moved along, careful, taking cover as we went. Way over the mesquites we could see riderless horses. The participants must have taken to the ground.

We came up to a sloping, wide gulley in the thick mesquites, and below us I could make out two figures. They were spread out prone on the ground, keeping their heads down, but once in a while rising to throw sixgun shots at something over the ridge.

"That's Corporal and Colonel," I yelled to Eddie.

Corporal half turned and sighted us. "Better keep back, Uncle Bud!" he hollered, making down motions with his hand. "Your friend Crowe's over there in the brush, and he's got a rifle."

The rest of it, Eddie and I watched from behind a rock ledge a little way back. The whole town was taking it in by now, like an audience in a rodeo grandstand.

We saw Corporal head out to the east, where the flats sunk down a little and the growth was thick. The lean, gangling figure of Colonel we could see crawling to the west. Straight ahead of us, in the brush and out of sight, the rifle had been popping. I

saw what the deal was. Those two old Indian fighters acted like they knew what they were about. They were circling to come in on Crowe from each side. If he wasn't holed up danged good, I figured, he was going to get surrounded.

Once in a while we could see brush move. After a long wait, while everybody was holding their breaths, there came a splash of what sounded like about half a dozen shots at once. Way off there in the brush we saw a figure rise, half erect, and the rifle was at his shoulder, aiming at something close. Then all the shots banged out and the man went down out of sight.

CORPORAL and Colonel brought him in. They were dirty and ragged and red-eyed themselves. But they didn't look half as bad as Crowe. He had a bad wound in his neck, and a bleeding hand. And his fine clothes didn't look like they had the day he hit Pesky.

"It's Crowe, the marshal!" everybody was saying to newcomers, as the Bar B waddies laid the man out in my store. "Corporal and Colonel have shot it out with the law!"

Corporal snorted. "Crowe nothing," he grunted, wiping the sweat off his face. They stretched the man out and went to doctoring him.

"Better known as Dandy Shriver, the Southwest badman," added Colonel. "The real Crowe's out at Bar B ranch—bad shot, but coming around, I understand."

"Do you mind," I said solemn and loud while everybody looked thunderstruck, "statin' in simple Oklahoma English what, if anything you are talking about? And how the double deck you dad-ratted knew this was Shriver?"

"Dewberries," Corporal said nonchalantly, plugging the bad man's neck wound with a bandage. "This here Shriver just found out a deputy marshal named Crowe was coming to Pesky to guard the money. So he ambushed him on the trail the other day. Left him for dead, hid in a wild berry thicket. Took all his credentials and identifications, and that there badge. Rode into town posing as Crowe. Figured he'd get possession of the money easy, then just plain ride off."

"Uncle Bud," Colonel spoke up, "did you notice the other day like we did—they ain't a lot of little pin holes in this buzzard's vest where the badge has been put on and took off a lot. Well, there're plenty pin holes in the real Crowe's vest."

Corporal added, "Course this crazy Colonel wanders off the trail looking for berries while we're riding into town and finds the shot man in the berry bushes. If we hadn't got him to Bar B quick he'd be dead before now. We noticed later this four-flusher here had a little berry stain on him, too."

"The rest was just adding up two and two," Colonel cut in, modestly. "Naturally it gives five, so there you are. Especially since this bad one was so fancy looking. Couldn't be anybody but Dandy Shriver. We just wanted to play it along, though, to see what his game was."

"Where's the money?" I demanded.

Eddie Jones looked sheepish. "We switched the fake package for it," he grinned. "Remember when Corporal and Colonel used you to get this fake marshal out of the way? Sent you to my office to fetch Crowe, to tell him some kind of a windy about Shriver being sighted in the hills. Heh-heh! That gave me a chance to switch the packages we had all ready."

I glared at Eddie. "So you were in on it all the time, you old fossil! Where's the real money packages now?"

Corporal looked at Colonel and Colonel looked at Eddie, and I could see the old man was about to bust.

"Looked under your bed since we was there last night, Uncle Bud?" Corporal spoke mildly.

"In that old pasteboard suitcase of yours?" Colonel added politely.

"Credit this here piece of stretched clothesline," Corporal bowed to the tall one. The crowd edged back by instinct.

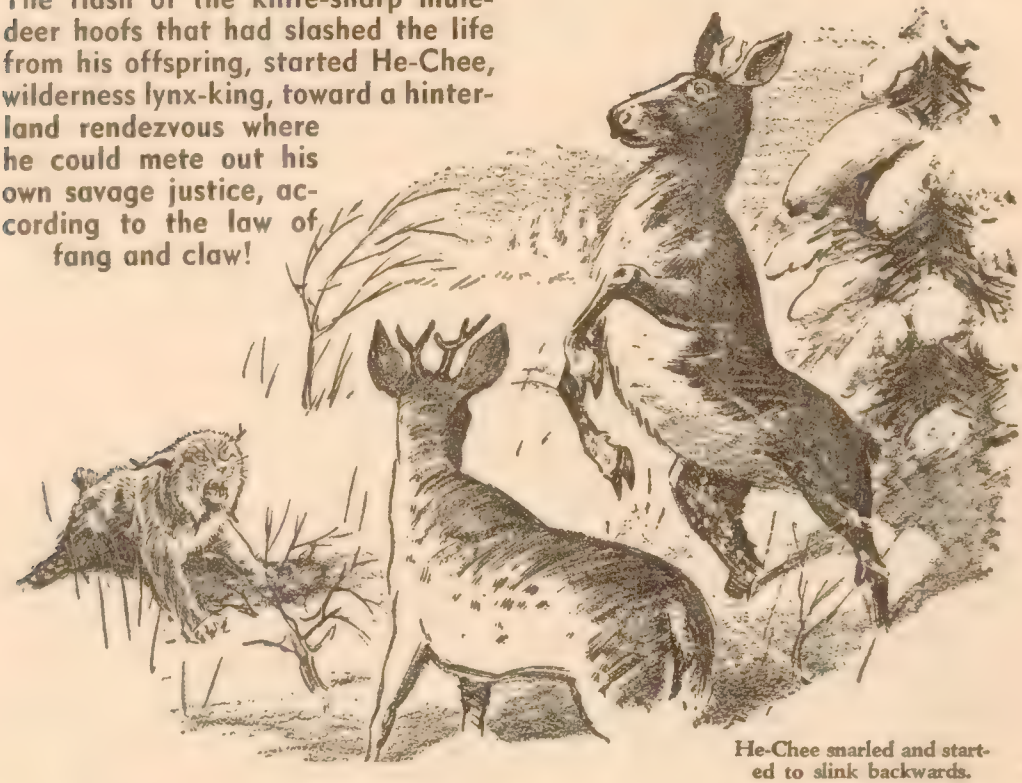
"Aw, Corporal thought it all out by hisself," retorted Colonel.

"That's a dang wall-eyed lie," barked Corporal, hopping around. "You big—"

"Don't call me a wall-eyed liar, little man," roared Colonel, squaring off. The crowd gave room. I prayed for the new glass showcase. Me and Eddie left 'em swinging and went up the hill to the house to get my pasteboard suitcase and tote its contents to the stage office.

King of the Smoky River

The flash of the knife-sharp mule-deer hoofs that had slashed the life from his offspring, started He-Chee, wilderness lynx-king, toward a hinterland rendezvous where he could mete out his own savage justice, according to the law of fang and claw!



He-Chee snarled and started to slink backwards.

HE-CHEE, the big tom lynx, despite his age, cavorted round the tamarac swamp with an agility a young kitten might have envied.

He was inclined to play with the snowshoe rabbits in the swamp as a cat might play with a mouse destined to be killed at will. Back in their lair, waiting for him was Chan, a beautiful she-lynx almost as big as He-Chee himself. She lay now in the warm sunlight, laving her luxurious fur, content to rest and leave the running of the rabbit trails to her lordling wilderness spouse.

Suddenly, on silent wings from the tamaracs Ah-Hoo, the great horned owl, a savage and ruthless killer in his own right, swooped down on He-Chee.

He-Chee bounded high, flinging his agile body about. His snarls increased in pitch to a scream as he felt the points of Ah-Hoo's fierce talons prick through his skin.

As the great feathered killer attacked again, He-Chee coiled onto his back and like lightning his four batteries of talons rowelled and slashed upward, in all directions at once.

Feathers flew—in one bunch was attached a piece of skin. Ah-Hoo soared upward, with the sudden realization that he had in future better confine his hunting to nocturnal periods when his sight was at its best. More than once he had made similar mistakes, and only the factor of disproportionate mass of feathers had saved him from death.

In the brief interval of Ah-Hoo's misdirected attack, Wapoos, the rabbit, and his

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

kindred had scattered into the willow breaks.

He-Chee screamed his anger and at once gave chase. No longer did he divert from routine hunting custom. His nose was low as he bounded easily over deep snow, his broad paws serving as snowshoes.

When he struck, he did so with unerring aim and effectiveness. He made a second kill and for a brief moment of exhilaration tossed his prey high in grandiose display of his skill and agility.

Now, licking his chops, he seized the rabbit of the second kill and trotted back to whisk playfully about his mate, making soft throat sounds as if to impress upon her the fact she had mated with He-Chee, the king lynx of all the Smoky River hinterland.

He-Chee bellied down, watching with baleful eyes the savagery with which Chan, his mate, attacked her food. The seductive tang of warm flesh and blood stirred him to a sudden consciousness of a hunger, but when he slithered hopefully forward, Chan whirled and threatened him with a deadly forepaw.

In the lodges of the bush Cree Indians, long tales had been told of the cunning, the skill, the wisdom and the savagery of He-Chee and his kind. But there were oldsters, too, who told such tales with tongue in cheek, realizing that He-Chee was at times apparently devoid of wisdom.

However that may be, He-Chee seemed to have forgotten that he had made two rabbit kills. He seemed content now to mew around his new mate, eagerly hopeful that her appetite might be sated before the small snowshoe rabbit was wholly consumed.

But such was not the case— Chan could have done with more food. She turned toward her mate, snarling as if in chastisement for his meagre provision.

He-Chee backed away, then suddenly, as if some sudden lance of memory had struck his brain, he whirled and went bounding off toward the tamaracs.

But He-Chee was too late. He found only remnants of fur to mark the scene of his first kill. His back arched as he snarled in mounting fury. Now and then he lashed out at empty air, his bitterness rolling as he tanged the fresh scent of fox.

He-Chee struck the fox trail and shortly glimpsed the thief—an old cross fox male whose fangs were blunt with the years. He turned his great brush and waved it as a mark of defiance.

If He-Chee were the "fool" of the wilderness, he certainly did not display it now. Slowly he circled about the dog fox, gradually forcing the old one from the packed rabbit run into the open soft snow. Then suddenly the tom lynx bounded forward. He did not strike, for his action was a feint, to draw the fox in. At first the ruse did not work, but He-Chee persisted. Now his fangs nicked the thief in the corner of the mouth. Reynard snarled and struck. It was his undoing, for He-Chee coiled to his back and screeching his anger and hatred, went savagely, swiftly to work in an attempt to disembowel the fox.

Blood spurted to the snow. He-Chee sprang to his big paws as the fox turned miserably away. The big lynx struck again, harrying his enemy, seeking again to force him to turn to attack, but the fox was too grievously injured. For one hour, two, He-Chee moved along in the blood trail, giving the dog fox no rest, no opportunity to bed down and staunch the steady flow of blood from his torn belly. He-Chee feinted and struck and then, when his patience was exhausted, he leaped and struck the fox down. Sharply, ruthlessly he bit at the throat until the heavy-brushed one panted in his swift approach to death.

He-Chee was king of his range. Shortly, kittens would be born to Chan. Intruders such as Ah-Hoo, the great killer owl, and the kindred of this now limp dog fox must pay the price of intrusion into He-Chee's kingdom.

FIVE spotted kittens came to Chan's lair. She laved them and gathered them in to nurse, with deep affection.

Outside, old He-Chee murmured from deep in his throat—perhaps with pride at the knowledge of the arrival of his new family, perhaps with contentment at the sound of gurgling water at the creek, which marked the true passing of winter and the swift birth of spring.

In the night he had listened to the honking of the wild geese and the whistling, whooping and trumpeting of their greater cousins, the swans. Life scuttled fussily in every copse—in the trees and wild shrubbery, and on the ground.

But apart from all these factors calculated to inspire the old lynx king with a feeling of contentment, there came to him the delicious tang of young beaver at the creek flats. He-Chee would share the responsibility for feeding and rearing of his young with Chan. Save when some man creature declared a dictatorship throughout the wilderness there still existed that primal law: the survival of the fittest. He-Chee would be called upon to defend his young against the depredations of marauders. He, in turn, must hunt his food where he could find it. Thus it was his nose wrinkled as a soft breeze fanned to his nostrils that faintly musky tang of the young beaver—the kindred of Ahmisk, chieftain of the riverfolk.

The vigorous young of Chan and He-Chee had grown swiftly. He-Chee had slunk through the thickets exercising his every hunting instinct. More than once he had climbed a tree to snatch an unsuspecting fool-hen from a branch. On the ground, he had found coveys of ruffed grouse so that Chan fed well.

But gradually the rabbits, squirrels and grouse had become wary and seemed to vanish in a mysterious, temporary exodus. He-Chee was forced to hunt farther afield; and today he crept along the creek flats, his nostrils quivering at the tang of young beaver.

Now and then he was startled as Ahmisk, the chieftain, dove, and pounded water with his broad tail as if in constant warning to his kindred.

He-Chee blinked his yellow eyes balefully as he settled himself down on his breast bone and all fours to wait with great patience. While not afraid of the water he preferred to await an opportunity to attack on land.

Either the force of rushing ice in the spring freshet or the hand of man desirous of letting the fish run through had caused a break in the dam. All available beavers were at work repairing the gap.

Tonight, He-Chee watched them in the moonlight as they tirelessly piloted the cut aspens into place at the dam break.

Now He-Chee's form rippled with excitement. He glimpsed two fat, waddling shapes playing on a mud flat close to the edge of the creek. An inch or so at a time, the big tom lynx moved forward, then suddenly he sprang.

As his fangs struck a young beaver, the water creature whirled and managed to topple into the stream. He-Chee retained his hold. He swam well. But Ahmisk, the old chieftain, had heard his young one's squeak. He whirled from the dam zone and swam swiftly to the scene.

He-Chee was not aware of Ahmisk's approach, for the great one swam under water in silence. Old He-Chee was busy swimming hard and steadily sinking his fangs deeper, deeper into the neck of his victim. Head held high out of the water, the young creature was now limp in death in his jaws, He-Chee suddenly relaxed his jaw hold. A terrible scream escaped him as he sank. The powerful cutters of Ahmisk had seized fur and skin just in front of He-Chee's breast and was with powerful strokes, tugging the cat creature on down to the dark deeps.

He-Chee was a survivor of many a terrific battle, but never before had death closed in on him so alarmingly. His lungs were almost at the bursting point, but even though his brain threatened to black out there still lingered in his fighting heart a desire to live.

He managed to draw up a battery of hind claws and force them down against Ahmisk's off side. Now He-Chee, in desperation, drove down with all his remaining strength, then drew those terrible rowels slowly, fiendishly backward.

The jaw hold of Ahmisk was broken. His flank open, bleeding badly, Abmisk went rushing madly into the deeps under a shelf of mud bank.

The almost spent form of He-Chee rose to the surface, where he sucked in broken gasps of air until at last he was able to fill his lungs and find his bearings.

He struck for the left bank of the stream and dragged himself ashore. He turned and shook his water-logged body, but though he quivered in every limb, every nerve fibre, he did not at first turn away. His face was a hideous mask as he snarled and screeched his curses when the head of Ahmisk rose to the surface. He heard the angry clacking of the big beaver's terrible front cutters before Ahmisk dove again from view.

Grumbling, He-Chee commenced to lick his wet fur. Though he had just come from the water, he was suddenly thirsty and lowered his mouth to the stream. Just then he

glimpsed, floating not two feet away, the limp form of his victim. Thirst forgotten, He-Chee stepped into water a pace of two and snatched the fat creature into his jaws. As he backed away he snarled his contempt or Ahmisk who so nearly had killed him by drowning.

Head high, He-Chee trotted back to his lair, where Chan greeted him with soft, kitten-like mewing. He-Chee left the beaver with her, unconditionally, while he hurried to the near by underbrush, there to scrape his fur clean of the clinging musky tang of the beaver and the stench of the creek.

THE BROOD of He-Chee had been out in the sunlight for a month, during which time Chan and their sire had never once relaxed their keen vigilance. Yeepek, the great bald eagle, and his kindred, were ever on the watch for an opening to strike; Ah-Hoo and his mate at the tamaracs, whose silent wings made no sound as they struck, were twice turned away in defeat.

Now the time had come to wander. It was an instinctive urge of the lynx kind. Had He-Chee left the lair and his brood, Chan herself would likely have led her family wandering farther afield. But whatever motivated this wanderlust—perhaps a desire to begin the training of the young—He-Chee led off. He was taking his family up into the higher country, where rolling hills were handsomely dotted by spruce belts.

In the nights, when He-Chee and his kindred sang an occasional nocturne, such voice sounds might, by nomadic trappers, have been mistaken for the wails of human infants in distress.

Today, He-Chee crept belly down through a wild fruit thicket of underbrush in a spruce belt. At his heels squirmed and tumbled the most vigorous of his brood—a bumptious tom kitten eager to learn, eager to emulate his sire's actions in the hunt.

Already the young one had tanged the scent of partridge. When he stumbled awkwardly over a dry windfall, causing sound, He-Chee spun round on him, glaring, his lips peeled back to display his fangs.

The little one cowered, then He-Chee turned and crept on.

In a small clearing, where a shaft of sunlight slanted down through a port in the spruces, a covey of ruffed grouse young pecked at small seeds, watched by the mother bird from a branch above.

In other circumstances, He-Chee might have growled contentedly, but he made no sound as he lay watching, his back muscles rippling.

Now his muscles grew taut. He was slowly rising, bunching his paws under him for slowly, surely, three of the grouse chicks were moving directly toward him. He was about to spring, when scrub crashed beyond the clearing. Head weaving, large eyes wide and staring, a small yearling muledeer buck entered the clearing, sending the young grouse flapping to cover.

A savage hatred at once possessed He-Chee. He leaped forward. Swaggeringly, the young buck rose to strike. He-Chee feinted and whirled, pulling the aggressive youngster away from the little tom kitten. Then from the scrub there plunged a greater form—the big form of Ah-luk, mother of the yearling.

He-Chee was almost caught by the suddenness of Ah-luk's attack. He was forced to exercise all his skill and agility as the doe rushed him, rising and chopping down with all four hoofs, any one of which could have killed him had its sharp points struck him.

Suddenly He-Chee whirled. His kitten had screamed. He saw the yearling buck rise and crash down on the already helpless, partly pulped form of the little kitten. He-Chee valiantly leaped, to strike, but Ah-luk bounded to the aid of her son.

The odds too heavy against him. He-Chee bounded clear, his voice sounds mounting in pitch to a terrible series of shrieks and screeches. He turned, snarling, but Ah-luk was ready, alert. He-Chee snarled hideously, but was forced to back off.

Later in great anger and anguish, mouthing his curses, and perhaps his regrets, he rejoined his mate and the four remaining youngsters. For upwards of the next twenty-four hours, as the stench of Ah-luk and her young one permeated the atmosphere, He-Chee continued to prowl and mouth his curses in high-pitched yeowls and screeches.

It was the dire necessity for food for his family that finally restored him to normal and sent him off to adjacent hunting grounds. Alone, he enjoyed far greater suc-

cess, killing one adult and two half grown chicks of the partridge family.

He-Chee devoured one of the chicks himself, down in a draw. The others he brought back to his kindred. Grumbling, he settled himself down for a sleep, as if he realized that Chan would ever be alert.

WHEN the first whipping snows of early winter blasted the wilds in blizzard fury, He-Chee felt restored exhilaration. His feet had grown a great spread of fur. Because of them he had no match in all the wilds in maneuverability in the deep snows. For a time, He-Chee and his family fed well, and often.

He watched his youngsters go into attack on their own. He-Chee had taught them well. They killed spruce hens and ruffed grouse and occasional squirrels. Now and then, while He-Chee watched, a youngster would climb, to expertly execute a leap of four feet from one branch to another, or successfully stab a young fool-hen. Old He-Chee's eyes blinked and he murmured soft throat sounds of pleasure.

But with the advance of winter and the coming of heavier snows, the deer family and the kindred of old Moosewa, chief of all the big antlered ones, came to the timber country. They came to escape the raids of the wolf packs. Though still possessed of their hard and powerful palmated antlers, the bulls preferred to yard up with their kindred for protection. He-Chee hated their scent, for it was one of the deer kind which had killed one of his young. He-Chee had not forgotten.

He-Chee and Chan, trailed by their young, hunted vigorously, picking up scent and killing what they could. But still their flanks grew gaunt. In the wooded areas there were plenty of spruce hens, but these were naturally protected by the presence of the antlered creatures and their kindred.

In the open country, danger now menaced the lynx family in the form of hunting wolves. He-Chee was much too light in weight to combat the wolf kind. He could not be expected to attempt to defend his family against such an attack, no matter how valiant his spirit. At best he weighed under forty pounds.

There had been times when, coiled on his back, at bay, he had almost disembowelled the cur dog of some trapper, or a young coyote, but wisely, in wolf country, he elected to remain ever alert. Shortly, as the snows quieted and settled, the muledeer would emerge from the timber, liking better the more open brush country for their feeding. Until that time, He-Chee must subsist on light rations, while he and his family maintained their vigilance.

Through November, the blizzards swept down with unabated fury, but at last the sharp sub-zero temperatures enforced their own sway over all the hinterland.

The snow settled and creatures heretofore hemmed in at the timber belts, ventured forth and spread farther afield.

Ah-luk, the old muledeer doe and her gangling yearling, minced on down to the lower levels, to the willow-studded meadows, where they browsed in comparative safety. Other deer of the range accompanied them, but Ah-luk held herself aloof from the bucks. She had developed her own great wisdom in her years of battling against the vicissitudes of the wilderness. She carefully beat a labyrinth of escape runs between the meadows and the protective timber area.

When started, she grunted a deep belly-tone blat of warning to her youngling buck of last year and bounded off to the spruces. At a fork in the run, she would urge the buck to bound straight to the timber while she stood a moment. Then she would whirl and bound off at a tangent, pulling pursuers along her trail.

The old doe would in time circle, to fetch up along the back trail of her pursuers and so, following a maze of baffling scents and trails, she would force the wolves to give up the chase.

Old He-Chee himself became baffled by these trails and scents, but daily, hunger sharpened his wits. He moved with great stealth down to the meadows where now and then a handsome big buck snorted challengingly, hoping to draw the big tom lynx into battle. Soundlessly, He-Chee bided his time. Today, he caught the scent of a rabbit and weaved in and out of willow clumps in what seemed an endless chase before at last he made the kill. It was indeed a poor kill, for Wapoos was almost in the final stages of the illness which accounted for the disappearance of his kind.

Proudly He-Chee trotted back to his family, but Chan was alone. The young had

left her, to fend for themselves. He-Chee quickly dropped his kill and whirled to pick up the young's fresh scent.

Not yet had the young lynxes enjoyed the schooling of a full round of the seasons. They lacked the wisdom of their parents and only in the nick of time did He-Chee catch up with and bat them back from a wolf trap.

The old tom's keen nose had picked up the scent of a pair of hunting wolves, already bedded down in the snow, ready to leap and give chase in their peculiar circular, relay method of attack when hunting in pairs.

He-Chee was forced by the wolves to herd his young ones to the moose "yard" for protection. At once, old Moosewa displayed his displeasure and his belligerence.

He-Chee himself came within a hair of being crushed. Before he could clear his brood completely, Ah-luk bounded from behind a willow clump to smash to death another of He-Chee's young.

HE-CHEE looked upon this timber zone as his own hunting preserve. Though at times his kind migrated to far zones, He-Chee, in his advancing age, preferred his own native range.

As the sun at last broke through the heavy frost fog, warming the range slightly, He-Chee took his wailing brood back to the tamarac country, not far from the lair of Chan.

He hunted through the thickets which lined the banks of Ahmisk's creek with some success, for it was here that old Rik, the cock grouse, and his kindred lived, feeding in the underbrush.

For two weeks He-Chee and Chan, with their three remaining youngsters, fared well.

Then came a dawn when He-Chee was disturbed by the hated scent of Ah-luk. He snarled softly and struck savagely at a clump of willows as if to test his speed.

Ah-luk forced runways along the small meadow at the creek zone, winding around and through the heavy willows where she and her yearling buck elected to browse, alone.

When hunger again struck sharply at the lynx brood, it was Chan who nearly brought disaster to herself and the young ones. She had stolen in on Ah-luk and the young buck, her nearly grown young trailing her —each demanding more and more food.

He-Chee arrived to chase them back from the threat of Ah-luk's killing hoofs.

The ways of the wilderness gods are strange. It was the wolf pack of Metisk, the big silver-gray leader, which made possible He-Chee's chance to mete out vengeance.

Metisk had called in his full pack—eleven hungry timber wolves. They struck down on the small creek meadow fanwise, to catch Ah-luk and her son bedded down.

He-Chee was startled by the suddenness of the attack and quickly headed his brood up into the safety of the near-by trees. He himself, in his great wisdom, remained crouched in the underbrush, through a port in which he could see the old doe bound to her feet. Now she broke, the young buck streaking sharply along her back trail. She whipped expertly about her meadow trails —cutting, doubling in a manner calculated to baffle the wolf pack. Then at last she found an opening, and with a thick blatted sound to her son, who seemed to be scurrying in all directions at once, she headed for the open country, along a back trail by which she had come down to the meadow.

Metisk and his pack gave chase, slowing down, somewhat, as their paws sank deeply into the soft snow.

Ah-luk cut suddenly to her left, making for a patch of spruce and aspen timber which would give her temporary respite and the chance, at least, to hide her son. The young buck, exhausted by fear and over-exertion, could not be expected to run much longer.

Ah-luk was successful. She managed to get the buck under an overhanging, moss-covered windfall, where he bedded down, and was screened by underbrush. The old doe whirled away from the zone in prodigious bounds and headed wisely on toward the moose yard.

Along the back trail, in the wake of the wolf pack, He-Chee bounded, his nose wrinkling with increasingly freshened hope.

He reached the small timber zone which the wolf pack had by-passed to follow the strong scent of the doe. He-Chee poured deep snarls from his throat now, sounds which rose in pitch to alarming screeches, calculated to strike terror into the heart of the young buck.

While He-Chee stalked deeper into the

bush, Chan and the three young ones circled the area, ready in a flash to turn the buck.

The young buck rose now, quivering with fear. He whirled and broke. He-Chee bounded along and succeeded in turning him. He turned him into the open range.

Slowly, surely, the lynx family closed in. Here was a creature which had brought death to their family, a creature whose very fear stench now fired He-Chee's memory. Two of his young had been struck to death by this quivering creature and his mother.

Snarling, his tufted ears and short black-tipped tail twitching sharply, He-Chee edged forward—closer—closer, to further harass the young deer. Suddenly He-Chee feinted. The buck whirled and rose, but Chan was at his back. He was bayed!

HE-CHEE rushed. The buck was rocked back off balance. He felt sharp fangs at a hind leg and in a panic blatted a deep cry. An hour, two dragged on in his great fear the buck made his final mistake: he reared and bounded again into the open.

Slowly, with deep and lasting patience, He-Chee and his kindred followed, closing in, wearing the young son of Ah-luk, their enemy, down—breaking his spirit, exhausting him in body and in mind.

Then suddenly, as Chan rushed from the rear, He-Chee sprang. The buck toppled and before he could rise, He-Chee's savage fangs had bitten into his throat. In a shrieked frenzy the big cat bit again and again, while the young lynxes struck at whatever parts of the buck's anatomy were closest to them.

In a mad pandemonium of sound, He-Chee at last sank his fangs deeper into the quivering warm flesh. Blood spurted into his face. Chan came in and together they continued to attack the deer's throat until at last he stretched out, kicking feebly.

Back arched, yeowling as he strutted grandiosely about the kill, He-Chee held his mate and their young off. His was the glory of the conquest; his the right to caterwaul the declaration that his vengeance was complete!

As the pale sun lowered into a pall of frost fog, He-Chee turned and made soft whimpering sounds.

He and his family bellied down to begin their feast. . . .

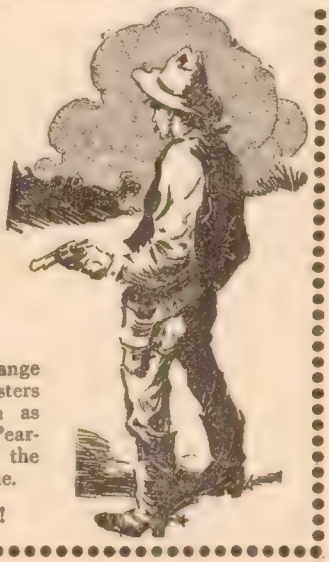
Off in the distance Metisk, the big gray wolf leader, poured out a long and penetrating cry; but if He-Chee identified this cry as a call of victory and declaration of the death of Ah-luk, he made no sound of acknowledgement. His chops were crimsoned and he murmured soft sounds of elation as he continued to enjoy the warm blood and fresh meat of his big kill. His family would survive the stern winter.

THE MAVERICK RIDES AGAIN!

Out of Mexico, riding hell-for-leather from a firing squad, came that formidable non-conformist, The Maverick, seeking sanctuary from the law of two nations. He found himself, instead, in the lead-slinging middle of a gun-king's whipsaw game, with a thirty-thousand dollar stake for the winner, and a bullet-studded coffin as consolation prize.

MAN-BAIT FOR THE GUN-WOLF PACK

By L. L. Foreman



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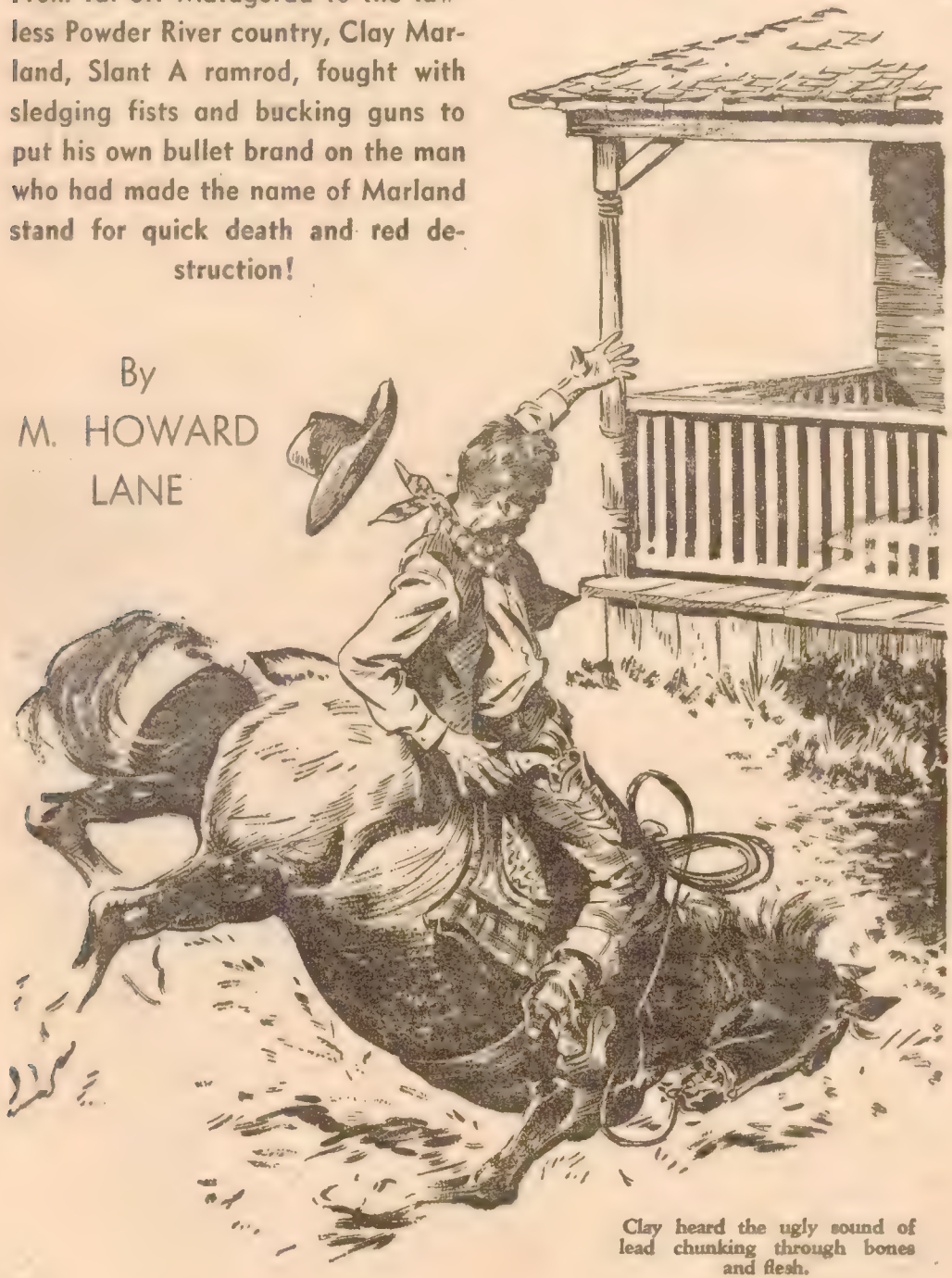
From far-off Matagorda to the lawless Powder River country, Clay Marland, Slant A ramrod, fought with sledging fists and bucking guns to put his own bullet brand on the man who had made the name of Marland stand for quick death and red destruction!

By
M. HOWARD
LANE



Clay heard the ugly sound of lead chunking through bones and flesh.

ER ROAR!

Gripping Novel of a Dead Man's Return!

CHAPTER ONE

Trail-Herd Coming

CLAY MARLAND had come up this trail in 1878, a youngster turning twenty, and still damp behind the ears. But just the same, the experience picked up on that drive had made him the foreman of this longhorn herd trailing to the Powder from far-off Matagorda on the Gulf. He was a worried foreman, but still the ramrod of this Slant A outfit.

The steers in that sluggish brown herd trailing along behind him belonged to Colonel Abe Atchison of Matagorda, and Clay was trailing them to new Slant A range along the Powder. He'd made his first trip into this country when it was just opening up, and Texas cattlemen had tired of trying to raise stock on mesquite beans and sage-brush. This Powder River country had been an unbelievable green haven, and many had said, "Here we will make our homes."

Fort Reno, off to the right, had guarded

the lives of those first settlers. It stood now—a gray and sturdy stockade with the Stars and Stripes flying over it. Clay studied the fort and felt his heart swell a little. It was a symbol of the freedom that war had nearly disrupted. But all that was in the past now—

If a man needed proof he had but to look ahead to the scattered smokes of ranch-houses, themselves hidden in coulees close to water and firewood. They were small ranches, here in this section of the Powder, marketing their beef in Buffalo, some thirty-five miles to the west. Few of these ranchers could claim a thousand head, let alone the four thousand longhorns that made up the Slant A trailherd, and that was one of the numerous things that he worried about.

Clay's bleached brows drew together above his hazel-hued eyes. He had started from Matagorda with the four thousand head, all right, but he couldn't tally more than thirty-five hundred now. There'd been that flash flood as they crossed the Red, that stampede when lightning had set the herd running. And the treacherous Canadian. Its quicksands had sucked more than one steer to its death.

They were losses an honest man couldn't make up. "I've got myself to live with," Clay thought stubbornly. "If it costs me my job, we'll steal no cattle between here and Clearwater Creek!"

Many another Texas drover had tried that system. Clay had heard more than one ramrod boast that his herd had grown mighty fast along the Powder.

Hoofs came pounding toward him, and Clay turned for a look, his frown deepening involuntarily. Sid Maxwell, who had been riding swing on the side of the herd nearest Fort Reno, was coming toward him. Maxwell was his straw-boss, but he had not been Clay's choice of a segundo. The appointment had been made by the colonel, and should not have been questioned, but Clay had questioned it just the same.

"Sid ain't good for the crew," he'd told Atchison bluntly. "Sure, he knows Texas cattle and he can work 'em. He's a top hand, but he ain't the kind of a man I'd pick to take up the trail—"

Colonel Atchison had asked for an explanation, and Clay knew he hadn't been able to give a very good answer. "Sid's just the kind that stirs men up around the campfire at night," he'd said. "He puts fool ideas in their heads, and makes 'em restless."

"The fool ideas are in your own head," Colonel Atchison had retorted acidly. "Maxwell is the best rider I've had in a long time. He'll be a good man to take over if anything should happen to you."

Clay had wondered a good many times along the trail if Maxwell knew what the colonel thought of him. The straw-boss had acted like it on more than one occasion, smiling as though at some secret joke, but he'd never failed to take an order and carry it out with speed and dispatch.

Sid Maxwell, Clay thought grimly, was a smart hombre. He was glad they were nearing the end of their long drive.

Maxwell came angling his flashy piebald mount around the leaders to Clay's side, and Clay noticed that the Matagordan was riding his own private horse.

"Yeah," Maxwell noted the scrutiny, "you guessed it, Marland. That cussed kid wrangler, Jim Sanders, always hands me a string that ain't fit crowbaits. So I have to ride my own bronc most of the time."

"I'll have a talk with him tonight," Clay promised.

"Not before you do some palaverin' with the hombre riding out from the fort," Maxwell said. "I come to warn you. Figured you might want time to cook up a good yarn for him. He sets a saddle like a shavetail, so it shouldn't be hard—"

Clay kept his mount moving, for the herd was pushing from behind, eagerly scenting the water ahead, where the chuck wagon fire was blazing in a coulee. He considered his reply carefully, after a glance at his segundo.

Maxwell stood perhaps five-eight in his stilt-heeled boots, but he made up in wiry strength what he lacked in height. Wedge-faced, his expression was habitually arrogant. He looked and acted every inch the top hand Colonel Atchison had named him, and right now that silent, sardonic mirth was twisting at his lips again.

Clay felt his own face growing hot. "What do you mean?" he asked at last. "I've never had to cook up a good yarn for a man yet. The truth usually fits."

Sid Maxwell's mouth tightened like a

trap. "Boss," he drawled, "I guess you don't know much about the military yet. You tell 'em what they want to hear. This shavetail, for instance, is goin' to ask you a lot of fool questions about our herd. He's goin' to want to know where you're headin', and he's goin' to want to know our losses to date. Maybe they'll tally our herd against your estimate after we hit Slant A range. So I figure you better tell him we started with four thousand head, and ain't lost more'n fifty or so along the trail—"

Clay's eyes narrowed in the nested wrinkles sun and wind had put about them. "You know we're close to five hundred shy," he said calmly, "so why lie about it?"

Maxwell looked incredulous. "Ain't you going to try and make up the loss from here to the Clearwater? Hell, that's part of the game."

"Not my game," Clay said flatly.

HE SWUNG AROUND in his saddle to acknowledge the salute of the lieutenant from Fort Reno as the man rode up to them.

"You the foreman?" the lieutenant asked. At Clay's nod, he continued, "Allow me to present myself. I am Lieutenant Abels, sir."

"Clay Marland. This is my straw-boss, Sid Maxwell."

The lieutenant nodded stiffly. "I will not delay you, sir. Major Stanton presents his compliments, and would like to know the size of this herd."

Clay felt the corded muscles across his solar plexus tense. "We left Matagorda with four thousand head," he said. "I'd say we tally three thousand five hundred now. And," his pale eyes were bleak as he stared straight at the lieutenant, "we'll hit the Clearwater with the same number!"

The lieutenant laughed, and he seemed to lose some of his rigid formality. "Excuse me, sir," he said, "but that's the most honest estimate I've heard from a drover in a long time. Most of them even claim the calf-drop to boost their tally." Then his face lost its pleasantness. "And most of them try to make up their losses as they pass through our valley. There is only one way to do that, and I have heard of ranchers laying out after dark with their rifles to protect their herds. I don't blame them, either."

"Neither do I," said Clay. "They'll have no trouble from us, sir. The Slant A wishes to remain on friendly terms with its neighbors."

"That's the kind of talk Major Stanton will like to hear!" The lieutenant saluted, and turned his mount smartly. "Good evening to you, sir."

Clay watched the officer depart, and then he turned his eyes on Sid Maxwell. "And that *ain't* the kind of talk you like," he said bluntly.

The Matagordan rubbed his long beak of a nose. His silence was more insulting than direct defiance. "Maybe," he said at last, "you'll change your tune before we hit the Clearwater."

"Perhaps you'd like to finish this little argument right now?" Clay suggested.

"Not me," said Maxwell, and that derisive smile was on his lips again. He turned his black and white paint and galloped back to his swing position.

The herd kept pushing on toward water, tramping forward irresistibly, heedless of the turmoil their coming was bringing to the Powder. Their hoofs made deep thunder in the dusk. Clay Marland wondered if the sound was prophetic.

He watched Sid Maxwell's paint find its place at swing, and then keep right on traveling, and Clay's lips tightened. Maxwell was set to tell the whole crew the decision he'd made and Clay wondered what might happen next.

The answer was his when he studied the hostile faces of the Slant A hands as he filled a tin plate at the chuck wagon fire. Afterwards, he stepped back into the shadows and hunkered down to eat.

Jim Sanders, the Slant A's young wrangler, filled his plate a second time and sidled over to squat beside Clay. Jim was only seventeen, and this was his first trip up the trail, but the boy had savvy, lots of it. Clay had liked him from the start, and it had amused him a little this afternoon when Sid Maxwell had complained about his mounts. The wrangler could give a man a bad string without appearing to do so.

"What's on your mind, Jim?" Clay asked when the boy was seated.

"I—I ain't a one to tell tales," the wrangler blurted, "but the talk is we're all going to lose our jobs when we hit the Clearwater. Colonel Atchison ain't goin' to put up with the losses we've taken."

"Mind telling me who is spreading that story?" Clay asked quietly.

"Hell, you know that as well as me!" Jim Sanders said heatedly. "Sid's been claimin' ever since we left Matagorda, that you couldn't ramrod a herd. Now we're short five hundred head, and he says that's all the proof any man should need that you ain't a fittin' foreman for the Slant A. But I say none of it was your fault. You can't control the weather, or the drift of quicksands in a river. I—I'm for you, but I guess there's plenty in the crew who've been doing a heap of listening to Maxwell."

His food had lost its taste. Clay stood up and hitched at his belt. Tall and lean, he stepped to the cook-fire, and the light from the coals highlighted his straight nose and wide, thin lips. The flames caught his somber expression, and made his face look old. Thumbs hooked in his sagging gunbelt, Clay stood for a moment without speaking, and then, deliberately, he looked full at Sid Maxwell, and the silent laughter was on that man's lips again.

He let his eyes swing over the rest of the crew squatting taciturnly on their heels. "You fellows wonder," he said at last, "why we're not going to make up our losses. One reason is because I don't hold with rustling. Another is because Lieutenant Abels told me these Powder River ranchers lay out and watch their cattle when a Texas herd comes through. They're getting mighty tired of having their stock stolen. The Army don't blame them, and neither do I. When we get settled on the Clearwater, we ain't going to stand for herds on their way to Montana rustling our cattle to make up their losses."

"If we don't pick up five hundred head," Sid Maxwell said, "we won't none of us be staying with the Slant A. Colonel Atchison will see to that!"

"I had no orders from him to make up losses," Clay said coldly. "Take that or leave it, Maxwell."

Sid Maxwell rose from the circle of riders, and deliberately unbuckled his gunbelt. "I'll leave it," he said calmly.

CLAY took off his own gunbelt and handed it to Jim Sanders who was standing beside him. He wanted to fight Maxwell, had wanted to ever since they'd left Matagorda. The sensation in his mind and muscles was like the feel of strong drink, but he held himself steady, and tried one last plea.

"We're the biggest outfit to come into this valley," he said quietly. "The ranchers who have settled here before us are going to do their share of worrying about us. They're going to wonder if we'll try and squeeze them into selling out. Small men never like big ones. Try and pick up our losses, and they'll fight."

"Lets you and me do that right now!" Sid Maxwell invited.

Clay heard Jim Sanders whisper urgently: "He's baitin' you, Clay. They're fixin' to gang you, once you start. Don't—"

Clay stepped past the fire to meet Sid Maxwell, and he didn't give a damn about anything anymore. He wanted to wipe that silent, sardonic laughter from Maxwell's lips. That was his one desire now. They came together, two men of a size, and Clay felt the skin across his knuckles shred as he landed a solid blow on Maxwell's pointed chin. He followed the blow with a pumping left to the other's hard stomach, and then they were trading punches, with Maxwell giving ground. The Matagordan wasn't laughing any more. His mouth was a red smear, and Clay heard him call, "All right, boys—"

Jim Sanders yelled a despairing warning, and then an avalanche seemed to descend on Clay. He felt himself falling, and he had one last unforgettable thought. This crew had belonged to Sid Maxwell ever since they'd left Matagorda. They weren't loyal to the Slant A. Sid Maxwell was their boss, and they were loyal to him.

He went down with one man clinging to his knees. Another had him about the shoulders, and Maxwell was standing over him now. He leaped in the air and came straight down, stilt-heeled boots ripping and tearing at Marland's chest.

Agony such as he'd never known before rolled through Clay. Blind with the pain, he couldn't move, but he could still hear a little, and the brittle sound of young Jim Sanders' voice came through the mists that were filling his mind, and Clay realized

that he had one friend in this outfit at least.

"Maxwell," the boy cried shrilly. "I got Clay's gun in my hand. Try trompin' him again, and I'll blow your guts out. That goes for the rest of yuh too."

"Now Jim," Sid Maxwell said placatingly, "don't go and do anything hasty. We ain't aimin' to hurt Marland. We just wanted to teach the high-handed son a lesson."

"You ain't goin' to get the chance to teach me any lessons, Sid," Jim Sanders said steadily. "And I ain't droppin' this gun. Jingles," he spoke to the big Negro cook, "I figure you're the only gent left in this outfit that I can trust, so you go down to the cavvy and cut out Marland's private hoss, and mine too. Bring 'em back pronto. I'm takin' Clay away from here, and I'll gut-shoot the fust man who tries to stop me. Get a move on, Jingles!" The boy's voice was cracking with tension, but the gun in his fist was rock-steady as it targeted the new Slant A ramrod.

"Go on, Jingles," Maxwell said. "Humor the boy. But Jim, I'm tellin' you, you're makin' a mistake. You're hitchin' your wagon to the wrong star."

"I ain't hitchin' my wagon to any star," the boy said stubbornly. "I'm jest givin' a hand to a man that's been danged decent to me ever since we left Matagorda, and I aim to keep on helpin' him until you sidewinders are all in Hell!"

Jim Sanders ordered the giant cook to rope Clay across his saddle, and then he led the two horses into the darkness beyond camp. He didn't think Maxwell would try any pursuit. The man wouldn't want the valley roused by gunshots, and yet at the same time Jim guessed that he'd better not try and circle the herd to ride back to the fort they'd passed that afternoon. The night-hawks out at the herd might try and capture them. That wouldn't be hard, either, for intuition told Jim that any fast riding might finish Clay Marland for good. He was still unconscious, moaning softly, and the ragged, tortured way he was breathing made Jim guess that Clay was pretty close to dead anyway.

His own fear brought something like a sob into the boy's throat. "I gotta get him someplace," he muttered. "Someplace where folks can look after him. God, pardner, you gotta hang on. Gotta live until we can even the score with those trail-wolves."

Beneath the vastness of the Wyoming sky the boy rode into the night. The stars and his fear kept him company, and finally he guessed that one of those bright stars must have fallen to earth, for ahead of him he spotted a gleam of light. It seemed to wink, and then he knew what it was. A lamp shining in a ranch-house window, half hidden beneath a dark clump of trees a mile or more ahead.

Instantly Jim wanted to speed their pace, but grimly he held their horses to the same steady walk. If some of Clay's ribs were broken, a jagged splinter of bone might prick the wall of his lungs, and then he would die for sure.

At last he rode into a coulee where tall trees grew, and where the light was a warm square of brightness behind a ranch-house window.

A door was flung open as he crossed the yard, and Jim saw the trim figure of a girl fill the opening. She carried a saddle carbine tucked under one arm, and as Jim rode into the pool of light about the steps he saw her oval face grow tight and unfriendly.

"Strangers aren't welcome at the Bar H," she said. "Particularly Texas men!"

CHAPTER TWO

Smoke Talk Along the Powder

JIM'S hands were trembling, and so was his voice as he answered. "Ma'am," he said, "most Wyomans came from Texas to start with, but I ain't goin' to argue the point with you now. I got a man here that's mebbe dyin'. If you don't lend a hand, he will."

"Oh!" the girl leaned her rifle against the door-case, and for the first time she seemed to notice the dark lump of Clay tied across his saddle. "I—I didn't see him. Can we get him inside alone? Dad and my brother are out on the range."

"We'll just have to manage him ma'am," Jim told her simply. "Clay's got to live!"

And as the long days and nights drifted together, that one fierce thought seemed to be all that was keeping the thread of life in Clay Marland's tortured body.

Mary Holland spoke the fierce phrase, "Clay's got to live!" more than once, and it was she, herself, who had ridden back to Fort Reno to rout the Post Surgeon out of his warm bed.

Grumpily he had looked Clay over and bandaged his broken ribs. "If he's injured internally," he told Jim and the girl, "there isn't much we can do for him. Looks to me like he's been beaten within an inch of his life. A man shouldn't treat a dog the way this fellow has been handled. Youngster, what do you know about this?"

And Jim Sanders, for a reason he could hardly explain to himself, had lied about it. "Dunno a thing," he said stubbornly. "Me, I'm headin' for the Bozeman Trail and the Montana gold fields. Found this feller a-layin' along the trail and brought him here."

After the doctor left, Mary Holland looked steadily at Jim until he flushed red. "Why did you tell him that story?" she asked. "You called this man Clay when you first rode up here, and you said he had to live. A stranger wouldn't mean that much to you."

"His name is Clay," Jim admitted, "and I figger mebbe he can answer your questions better than me once he's able. You see, he's goin' to have a job to do, and I figger he'll want to handle it his own way, without no interference from the Army."

The girl asked no more questions for she could see that Jim didn't want to talk about his friend, but toward morning, when the two Holland men came home, he was forced to speak.

From the bedroom where he was sitting beside Clay's bed, Jim heard the men stamp into the front room. He glimpsed the elder Holland, a tall, tired-looking man with dark, piercing eyes like the girl's.

"Hank Stevens came back from the fort tonight, Mary," Clem Holland told the girl. "He brought word that Lieutenant Abels had had a talk with the boss of that Texas herd. Said he was a straight-shooter who claimed there'd be no rustlin' to make up their trail losses. That word will make folks rest a sight easier. We don't want no trouble along the Powder. Hello, who is this?"

Jim stood in the bedroom door and the elder Holland's words had made him a little sick. "I'm Jim Sanders," he blurted, "and what you been hearin' was true all right—this afternoon. But it don't hold now. Clay Marland's layin' in this room, nigh dead, and a Matagorda gun-hawk has taken over the Slant A herd. He aims to make up their losses and mebbe more."

Jim paused for breath, and then poured out his story. When he'd finished Clem Holland shook his graying head, and looked toward his son, a quiet-faced youth of twenty, who had entered in time to hear most of Jim's tale.

"Cal," he said, "looks like your ridin' ain't done for tonight. Saddle a fresh bronc and carry word up the valley that there'll be smoke talk along the Powder. We ain't in the business of raisin' cattle to make up the losses of any more Texas trail-herds—and it's time they found it out!"

Clay roused to the murmur of voices, and he knew he was in bed, and that his body felt like it was cased in steel bands. Breathing was agony. Then he relapsed into unconsciousness again. Fever was heating him, and there were only moments throughout the next week when he was dimly aware of people in his room. One of them, strangely enough it seemed to him, was a dark-haired, dark-eyed girl, and her hands putting damp cloths on his forehead, and smoothing his covers calmed him when the fever struck.

He told her in his delirium of his past life, for a man seems to think of those things when the heat of fever is in his brain. Told her of being orphaned at an early age, of growing up in Texas during the hectic war years, and the grimmer ones of Reconstruction. He spoke to her of Colonel Atchison 'the finest man in Texas,' who had but one fault. "Trusts folks too far," he muttered to the girl. "Trusted Maxwell. Now the Slant A will suffer—"

More than the Slant A would suffer, Mary Holland thought, but it was close on three weeks before she could tell Clay of what had happened. He was up and about now, and feeling almost like himself again. He'd had a shave that morning with Clem Holland's razor, and when he wandered out to the porch he found the girl there doing some sewing.

"Mary," he reached down and caught her hands, and looked into her dark eyes. "Mary, it's time we got things straightened

out. Where's Jim and your menfolks? I ain't heard 'em around the house since yesterday. And before they pulled out even Jim was acting kind of funny. Mary, you all have been trying to hide something from me, but I'm fit again now, and ready to start acting like a man instead of a danged invalid. Has Maxwell—?"

"Sid Maxwell," the girl blazed, "is the wickedest man who ever came out of Texas. Oh, Clay," her eyes filled with hot tears, "sit down. I—I have been wanting to tell you about things, but dad and Cal and Jim have vetoed me every time. They claimed you'd want to be on the move the minute you heard the news, and they figured you weren't strong enough. You see, dad and Cal like you, Clay, but—" she added almost inaudibly, "I guess we're about the only ones who do!"

Clay sat down in a big, home-made porch chair, and his thick, bleached brows drew together. Puzzled, he said: "Maybe you'd better give this to me slow, Mary. Folks don't even know me along the Powder, so why should they dislike me?"

"Clay," Mary Holland said, and her voice was deadly quiet, "the Slant A is a name men along the Powder will hate for the next twenty years! The Slant A—and you!"

"But I've been here—"

"Only nobody knows it," Mary Holland said patiently. "Jim started it by telling the fort doctor that he'd picked you up alongside the trail. Jim thought you'd want to settle your score with Maxwell in your own way, and that he was doing you a favor. We kept up the deception for the same reason—until it was too late. A neighbor of ours, Hank Stevens, was at Fort Reno when Lieutenant Abels rode back after talking to you. He told Hank the ranchers along the Powder wouldn't have to worry about the Slant A. That their ramrod, Clay Marland, was a straight-shooter. Hank brought that word up the river. When dad and Cal came in that night and Jim heard the news he told us the truth about what had happened to you, and Cal set out to warn everybody to be on the look-out for trouble; but he didn't mention that you were here with us for fear that the word might get to Maxwell, and he'd come and try to finish what he started. I—I have an idea he thinks you probably died from your beating that night."

"What makes you think that?" Clay asked quietly.

"Because," he watched the hot tears come into the girl's eyes again, "Sid Maxwell has assumed your name! Made it the most hated name from Fort Reno to the Bozeman!"

"MY NAME!" Clay half rose from his chair, then settled back again, and his voice was flat and toneless when he murmured, "Go on, Mary."

Her own voice was almost as toneless as his as she continued. "Maxwell brought the Slant A herd on, the day after Jim came with you. All of us, except Cal, were busy just trying to keep you alive. He was out on the range, and he saw Slant A riders cutting stock out of our herd, and rode toward them. Sid Maxwell, and half a dozen of his tough hands came to meet him, and Maxwell made his boast right then that he was going to hit the Clearwater with four thousand head and more. Said he was going to cull fifty longhorns out of our herd, and if Cal interfered he'd get a bullet in the back.

"Cal had a hunch, and asked Maxwell his name. And Maxwell sat there with a grin on his lips, and called himself Clay Marland. Said he was the ramrod of the Slant A, and that he'd sure pulled the wool over that shavetail's eyes the afternoon before. He let Cal ride off without trouble, but there's been plenty not so lucky. Some ranchers who defied Maxwell have been beaten. Two men were found dead along the Powder, but nobody can prove Maxwell killed them."

"In my name!" Clay said slowly, and an anger hotter than the fever that had ravaged him was heating his blood. He started to get to his feet, and then settled back, his hazel eyes narrowing suddenly. "You mentioned something about people knowing the name of Clay Marland from Fort Reno to the Bozeman Trail." Suspicion started to grow in him like the birth of some evil seed. "The Big Horns, the Bozeman, Montana," he spoke half to himself. "Mary, the Clearwater and Slant A's new range ain't more than three or four days drive up-river from here. If Maxwell didn't stop there—"

"We've heard there's a big Texas herd on its way to Montana, and Virginia City," the girl said almost inaudibly. "They're raiding as they go, and their ramrod's name is Clay Marland. Jim and dad and Cal have gone to check that rumor. That's why you haven't seen them around since yesterday."

"God-a-mighty!" Clay whispered, and then he shook his head in involuntary admiration of Sid Maxwell. "There ain't nothin' small about that Matagorda gun-hawk, to say the least of it. I believe he's had that plan in his head all the time. To rustle that Slant A herd and drive it to the Montana gold fields. The biggest rustlin' job in history! Makes any border raid I've ever heard of look like two bits. And Virginia City won't be particular about the brand on the beef they eat. Only they ain't going to sample any if I can help it!"

Clay stayed in his chair for another minute, and a picture came before his eyes—the remembered face of Colonel Atchison. Ruddy cheeks, white mustache, a smile on his lips for every man. "The colonel scraped the bottom of the barrel to fill out the herd we started here with," he said softly. "If we don't get it back, he'll be busted."

There was tenderness in the girl's eyes that Clay didn't notice. "That's like you," she told him gently. "You think of the colonel first when it's your name and reputation that are at stake. Clay, if we can't straighten this out—there'll be no place along the Powder you can call home."

Clay stood up and moved to the girl's chair. He lifted her to face him. "You want me to call the Powder home?" he asked softly.

Mary Holland met his eyes bravely. "Yes!" she said simply.

Clay wouldn't trust himself to kiss her. That might come later—and it might not come at all. He turned abruptly, and went into the bedroom that he'd grown to consider his own. Ten minutes later he was back on the porch with his gunbelt strapped about his middle. He carried a thin roll of blankets under one arm, and his saddle under the other.

But quick as he had been, Mary was there before him. She had changed her dress for a divided leather riding skirt, blouse, and heavy jacket.

"You can't sneak out on me, Clay Marland," she said almost gaily. "I knew I couldn't keep you here so the next thing to do is go with you. I've already got a pack of food out at the barn, and if we cut across the valley to the Bozeman we can't miss dad and the boys. Maybe they'll have news for us."

The news would not be good even if they met the Hollands and Jim. Clay looked down at the girl, and he seemed almost like a stranger to her suddenly—a hard-faced, bleak-eyed stranger.

"Ride with me, Mary," he said quietly, "and you may not be coming back for a long time."

"I know," the girl said steadily. "I know that, Clay. You won't come back until you kill Sid Maxwell."

Clay shook his head. "Killing Maxwell is just part of it. I won't come back without the Slant A herd—or the money it brought in Virginia City!"

They reached the Bozeman at nightfall. In the dawn they ate breakfast and started up the trail toward Montana. The bloody Bozeman where the Sioux had roamed. Others had died along this trail, but the way had stayed open just the same to Grasshopper Gulch, and Bannack, and Virginia City. The wide Gallatin had called ranchers and farmers, but that great valley would not call Sid Maxwell.

"If we don't run into Jim and your folks," Clay said, "we'll head straight for Virginia City. It's the new capital of Montana, and that's where Maxwell will take the Slant A."

"I hope," Mary Holland said, "that we meet dad and the boys—"

But as the days passed they saw no sign of the Holland men or Jim Sanders. The passersby they met on the trail had a grim tale to tell of a Texas herd that had rolled like a resistless river past their ranches gathering cattle as a true river gathers sediment.

One man said bitterly, "We weren't strong enough to fight that Clay Marland. He had twenty riders to back him, and they were all gun-hawks. I'd rather lose a few cattle than my life. I got a wife and family to think about—and I wouldn't be much use to them dead! But if the time ever comes when I can catch that Clay Marland over gun-sights, he won't live very long!"

"You see?" Mary Holland said when the man had passed on, and her eyes were tragic.

"Yes," Clay said, and he saw even more clearly than the girl that there could be no peace for him or the Slant A until these men were paid for their losses.

Another they met said dully, "There's never been anything like it. They culled my herd and drove on. If I ever meet that Clay Marland without a bunch of tough hands to guard him I'll gut-shoot him like a mad dog!"

"You'll meet him," Clay told the man quietly, "but I don't think you'll shoot him. Mebbe he's done you a favor. The market for beef in Virginia City is bound to be up, but makin' a small drive wouldn't profit you much. Hell," Clay's lips twitched mirthlessly, "that gent is drivin' a pool herd to the gold fields, only he don't know it—yet. You'll get your cut of the profits, mister, I'll promise you that."

They left the rancher scratching his head and muttering to himself, "That young feller sounds like he knows this Marland. Danged if he don't. But what can one man and a purty gal do against twenty tough gun-hawks?"

They reached Bannack, and a storekeeper there told them a Texas herd had passed by, bound for Virginia City.

"Fellers from all these parts are ridin' over to the City for the big sale," their informant vouchsafed. "Afterwards, I hear tell, their ramrod is takin' over the Hurdy-Gurdy House, and throwin' a shindig for all-comers. Free likker and dancin' partners. Kinda countin' ridin' over to it myself."

"When is this sale and show coming off?" Clay asked.

"This Sunday," the man said. "Sale in the afternoon, and shindig afterwards. Goin' to be something, I tell you!"

"There's the reason we haven't seen Jim, or your folks," Clay said when they reached the wagon road to Virginia City. "They've been trailing Maxwell. Likely we'll meet them in the capital."

"But, Clay, what then?" Mary asked. "Four against twenty—what can we do? And you can see how smart Maxwell is. Now that he's in Montana he's acting like a law-abiding citizen."

"Sometimes," Clay told her, and there was the shadow of a smile on his lips, "being law abiding has its draw-backs!"

IT WAS all he would tell Mary despite her pleading with him to explain his remark, but she noticed that he seemed more cheerful than at any time since they'd left the Powder. And, as they drew closer to the Territorial Capital, she saw Clay keeping an eye on the cabins that dotted the slopes on either side of the road.

Finally, from one of them, came a hail, and Clay drew rein. He grinned at Mary, and gestured toward the trail that led up to the cabin.

Running down it, his thin legs seeming to touch nothing but air, came Jim Sanders.

"Figgered your folks and Jim might be holed up where they could keep a look-out for us," he told the girl.

Jim Sanders panted up to them. He looked like a shaggy, gangly puppy as he shook hands. "Sure mighty glad to see ye," he said. "Figgered you wouldn't be stayin' on the Powder long after we didn't come back. Clay, you look like your old self again."

"And feel the same, Jim, thanks to you."

"We been workin' in shifts watchin' the trail for you folks," Jim exclaimed. "Cal's sleepin' right now, and Clem, he's in town keepin' an eye on Maxwell and his crew. T'ain't hard to do because Sid's been cutting a fancy swath for himself in the city. He's in good with the sheriff and the councilmen, spendin' money on 'em free as air. Clay," his young face turned somber, "nobody around here will listen to us if we try and tell them that Sid Maxwell stole the Slant A herd."

"Mebbe we won't be tellin' 'em anything," Clay said briefly. "Let's get on up to your cabin and find some grub, if you got any."

"Plenty," Jim said.

"The food will have to wait," Mary Holland said firmly, "and so will you gentlemen—on the outside. If there's water in that place I'm going to take a bath!"

Clem Holland returned from Virginia City as night tinted the hills, and his face was grim in the light of the lamp hanging from the ceiling. "You'd think that cussed Maxwell was a hero, the way folks are treating him. He's got hisself all rigged out in fancy duds, and I hear there'll be a

crew workin' half the night decoratin' the Hurdy-Gurdy House for the big show tomorrow. Marland," he looked directly at Clay, "what idees have you got?"

Clay's face looked suddenly old in the lamp-light. This was the time to explain the plan that had come into his mind after talking to the Bannack store-keeper. "I've got a heap of ideas," he told them soberly, "and one sticks out in front of the rest. Powder River ranchers, and the men along the Bozeman who lost cattle to the Slant A have got to be paid back. The balance goes to Colonel Atchison."

"There'll be aplenty," Clem Holland said grimly. "Ranchers up here are hungry for beef to stock their ranges, and the cities and camps need meat. I figure the goin' price will be around twenty dollars a head. Maxwell and his gunhawks will split between eighty and ninety thousand dollars—"

"Lordy," Jim Sanders whistled softly. "I hadn't got right down to figuring it, but she'll amount to that, all right."

"Maxwell is demanding cash for all he sells?" Clay asked.

Clem Holland nodded. "They've got it around here, and ain't goin' to mind forkin' it over."

"A lot of money," Clay mused, "and Sid's got a lot of gun-toughs hungry to get their cut. Maxwell ain't nobody's fool, so he'll figure it the same way, and likely head for the office of this Hurdy-Gurdy House right after the sale. The crew will come slippin' in, and nobody will notice because they'll be having too high a time. That's his reason for staging this shindig. It'll last all night, and by the time folks sober up, his men will be gone.

"I hope," he added almost negligently, "that Sid paid for his party in advance, because if he didn't there's going to be some mighty unhappy merchants when they come to collect."

Clay's plan had already penetrated Jim Sanders' mind. "Yuh mean we're goin' to stick 'em up?" he breathed. "Take the cash—"

"I'm going to be waiting for Sid," Clay said lazily, but he looked tense as a cocked gun. "That money belongs to the men who raised the cattle, and Colonel Atchison. He'll be at the Slant A by the time we get there."

"If we get back!" Mary Holland cried.

"She's a risky deal, son," Clem Holland shook his gray head, "but I can't name a better one. Mary will hold the horses out front. Me'n Cal and Jim can back your play."

"You ever hear about two—or four, being a crowd?" Clay asked. "You're all going to wait outside for me. If I ain't out of the Hurdy-Gurdy House ten minutes after Sid Maxwell walks in, I won't be coming."

The doors of the Hurdy-Gurdy House were open and people were eddying in and out for a pre-celebration drink as Clay stepped inside.

"Best shindig we've had since Virginia City took the capital away from Bannack," he heard one man say. "Bringing a Texas herd clean up here was one good idea."

The man's companion said, "I hear tell there's some blotched brands on these steers."

"Hell," the first speaker retorted, "the steaks I eat don't wear no brands!"

Clay moved inside the garish hall. Tables of chance had been shoved against the walls. The floor was cleared for dancing, and there were a half dozen shirt-sleeved tenders behind the long bar.

"Goin' to be quite a party," Clay thought, and then he felt someone at his elbow. It was Jim Sanders. The boy's thin face was earnest.

"I've got to side you, pardner," he whispered. "We've travelled a long trail together. Besides, Maxwell ain't going to tote no eighty thousand in cash back from that sale single-handed. He'll have guards."

Clay couldn't refuse the boy. After all, Jim had saved his life, and he had as much right as anybody to be in on this showdown. He nodded without speaking, and moved toward a door near the front of the hall marked Office. He opened the door and stepped inside with Jim at his heels. The big, flat desk was empty, waiting the coming of Sid Maxwell, and the gold and greenbacks he would divide there with his gun-hawks.

Behind the desk was a narrow door that led into a clothes closet. "Get inside," Clay said. "Back my play, Jim, and don't spend any extra lead."

"The hosses are around the corner of the building," Jim Sanders said. He caught Clay's hand for a second. "We've travelled

a long trail together, pard. This'll end it."

Clay shook his head, and his mouth twisted. "Tonight won't end it, Jim," he said softly, and he was thinking of all that any man could want—a home along the Powder with Mary Holland in it. But he could never have that, Clay knew, until he cleared his name.

Through the crack in the door he had only partially closed, Clay saw Sid Maxwell and a pair of Slant A men enter the office. Each of the riders carried a long, telescope bag.

"The pay-off is heavy, Sid," one of them chuckled. "Totin' these ought to rate me an extra cut."

Clay had his Colt in his hand, and he was remembering the picture of Sid Maxwell standing over him, boots ready to tramp him into the ground.

"You'll get your cut in Hell!" he said coldly, and stepped from the closet.

Sid Maxwell had started to seat himself at the desk, but he stiffened, halfway into the chair.

Jim Sanders had followed Clay from the closet. "I'll crack a cap," he warned, "on the first man who makes a move!"

Sid Maxwell's silent laughter was gone from his lips. His mouth was straight as he stared at Clay. "Marland," he whispered, "I figgered you were dead . . ."

"Sometimes the dead rise," Clay said. "I want those bags, Sid. Drop 'em, boys. Jim will carry them out." His hazel eyes were glowing like a cat's as he looked at Maxwell. "Call the law, Sid," he said softly, "and we'll take 'em back along the Bozeman and let the ranchers tell what they lost to you."

Sid Maxwell's mouth was open. He was breathing hard. "Marland," he said, "I'll kill you if it's the last thing I ever do."

Clay nodded, and he recognized the truth in Maxwell's threat. One of them was going to die before either could find peace. "I'll be waiting on the Clearwater," he said. "Adios, Sid."

CHAPTER THREE

Gun-Trap on the Clearwater

THEY rode out of Virginia City, and only the sound of the orchestra inside the Hurdy-Gurdy House followed them. The musicians were playing *Buffalo Gals,* a right sprightly tune, but Clay had no feeling of sprightliness, no sense of elation. A glance at the tight faces of the little group about him showed they felt the same way. They all knew the answer. Sid Maxwell and his Matagorda gun-hawks would be on their trail as soon as they could ease out of the hall and saddle their horses.

Mary Holland's eyes were haunted as she glanced at Clay. "How soon?" was all she asked.

Clay read the tragic fear in the girl's eyes, and he couldn't find it in his heart to try and minimize their danger. "I told Sid I'd see him on the Clearwater, Mary," he said gently.

Clem Holland had procured two pack horses which they'd left saddled at the cabin. One carried their gear. Clay lashed the two telescope bags on the other animal, and covered them with a poncho.

"Let's ride," he said grimly. "We've got some calls to make on our way home."

Morning found them well beyond Bannack, heading into the north end of the Bozeman where it rounded the Big Horns.

"If any of you get sleepy," Clay told them, "borrow Clem's eatin' tobacco, and rub a mite of the juice in your eyes. It'll keep you awake."

They made their first call toward evening at the ranch of the man who'd told Clay and the girl that he'd shoot Clay Marland like a mad dog.

Parked before the porch of the Flying U ranchhouse, Clay watched Henry Utterbank, the owner, blink as he recognized the travel-weary crew. "Why, you and that gal are the pair I talked with on the Bozeman a few days back. Light and set, strangers. You look like you could stand the rest. By the way, did you have any luck trackin' that rustler, Marland?"

"I'm Clay Marland," Clay said wearily, and he smiled a little as he watched Utterbank's eyes widen.

"You—?" he said.

"I've got a little money for you," Clay said. "How many head you figger you lost to the Slant A?"

"Why—why between twenty five and thuty, I'd say."

"Make it thirty," Clay said. "Jim, unpack one of our bags. Mary, you're cashier. Figger Mr. Utterbank won't mind giving

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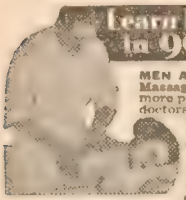

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you a receipt. I aim to show 'em to the Colonel when we get back to the Clearwater."

"Lordy," Utterbank exclaimed. "I'll sign it standin' on my head if you want me to!"

They ate like famished wolves in the Utterbanks' cheerful kitchen, and exchanged their fagged horses for fresh ones. Three hours sleep Clay allowed them, and at midnight they pulled out again.

Mary asked only one question as they rode beneath the high, richly blue sky of Wyoming. "How many men will Maxwell bring back with him?"

Clay shrugged, but the same question was bothering him. "We'll know when we meet them," he answered.

Their reception along the Bozeman was enough to gladden their hearts, and cheer them onward. At times it was also enough to redden Clay's ears, for at every ranch Jim had to do some proud explaining.

"Put the credit where the credit is due," Clay growled at him, after they'd made another rancher mighty happy. "The four of you rate more thanks than me. I wouldn't even be here if it hadn't been for your nursin'."

They reached the line of the Clearwater, where that bright stream rolled out of the Big Horns and slanted across the plain toward the Powder.

The bluestem was trampled and brown, showing that a great herd had come this way, and Clay turned them into the trail. Small ranches dotted the course of the Creek. Hard-pressed most of them were, where even the loss of ten steers would make a dent in their herds. Some of these people needed cash right now to see them through until fall round-up, and their hatred for the Slant A and a man named Clay Marland changed to words of praise wherever they halted.

Even Clem Holland was wiping furtively at his eyes after they left one rancher who had lost almost his entire herd in Sid Maxwell's sweep toward the Bozeman, and Mary Holland was unashamedly crying.

"You know," she said softly, "I—I know what Santa Claus must feel like now. So, so darned good inside. Oh, Clay—" the girl rode close to his side and caught his hand.

But Clay had trouble keeping his worry from the rest of them. These last few days they'd been forced to slow their pace, for their calls had become more frequent. Sid Maxwell, riding hard, could have overtaken them by now, he realized, and yet the Matagordan had not showed up. Even with the money they'd been dispersing, and Clay had a sheaf of receipts carefully tucked in the breast pocket of his shirt, there would still be a tidy fortune to hand over to Colonel Atchison. Enough to make a nice haul for any gun-hawk.

He found himself watching their backtrail more closely than ever all the last day of their ride, for he figured they'd reach the Slant A and the end of their long trail about dusk. The end of the trail? Clay shook his head. No, it wouldn't be the end of the trail for him. Either he or Sid Maxwell had to die before it could be called that.

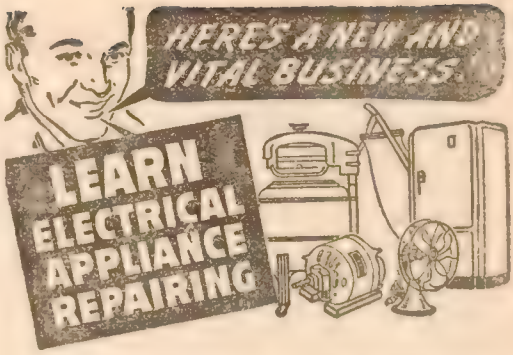
Tension built up in him, all through the remainder of the afternoon, and toward evening they topped a prairie rise, and across the wide, rippling leagues of bluestem Clay made out the barns and buildings of Slant A nestling in the mouth of a coulee a couple of miles ahead.

CLAY halted his troop with an upraised hand, and his face was thin, and brown, and tired as he looked at them. "We've come a long way," he said softly, "so I guess it won't hurt us to wait another hour or so before ending this ride."

"What are you drivin' at, pard?" Jim Sanders asked suspiciously. The trouble they'd shared had deepened the maturity of his face. Somewhere along the line, Clay realized, young Jim had grown up.

"I'm asking you all to stay here while I ride in and look things over. Colonel Atchison went to Chicago, but he was coming back thisaway on the U.P. He'll know everything that's been going on, and I'd kinda like to see him alone."

"You're thinkin' Sid Maxwell may have cut across country, and be there waiting for us!" Jim Sanders charged. "You want to face him single-handed, but yuh ain't goin' to do it. I'm ridin' right in with you, whether you like it or not! Mary and Clem and Cal oughta stay here, though," he added as an afterthought. "It ain't their fight."



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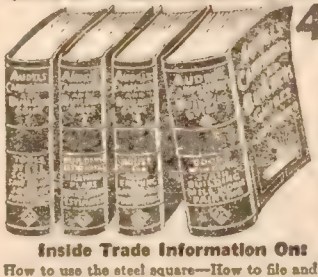

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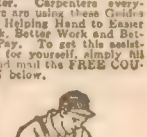

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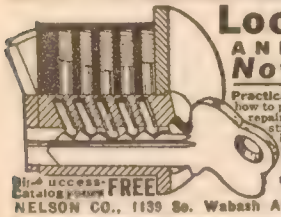

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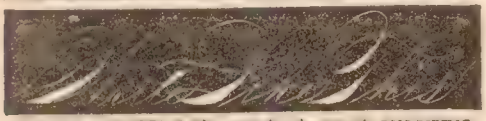

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Mary Holland looked at Clay, and a deep breath stirred her bosom. "It's my fight," she said steadily. "A woman that won't back her man isn't worth her salt!"

"Mary—" Clay murmured, and there was no need for him to say more.

He touched spurs to his mount, and heard Clem Holland chuckle behind him. "Beats the grab the notions some folks get. You figger we done all this ridin' from hell to breakfast just to be left outa the fun at the pay-off? Cal," he added, "I do calculate it might be just a mite smart if a couple of us came in from behind the house. Lets you and me sashay around thataway."

Clay straightened involuntarily in his saddle as they broke through the cottonwoods banding the Clearwater ford. The girl and Jim rode proudly on either side of him, each of them leading a pack-horse.

The ranch yard was devoid of life. The Slant A seemed to be sleeping.

He cast one last look at the boy and girl on either side of him, and then he buried his spurs deep in the flanks of his jogging mount. The animal leaped forward into a gallop toward the roofed porch that crossed the front of the house. Something was wrong here. The silence was the waiting, lethal breathlessness of a cougar about to drop on helpless prey.

An upstairs window in the house screeched open. Clay caught a glimpse of Colonel Atchison, his long white hair in wild disarray about his head.

"Clay!" the colonel shouted. "You're riding into a trap—"

A Winchester cracked from the door of the big barn, and Clay saw the colonel jerk his head back inside the room. Another pair of guns blazed from the shadows of the porch, and Clay heard the ugly chunk of lead striking through flesh and bone. He felt his mount falter and stumble forward, and jerked his feet from the stirrups.

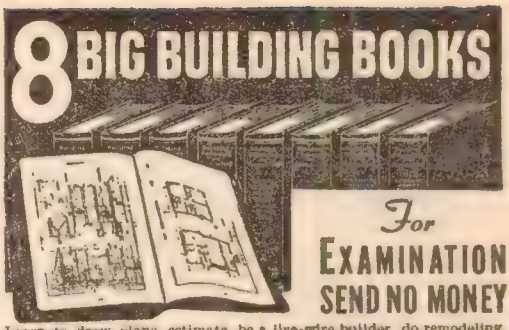
Clay lit running, dragging at his Colt, one last swell of bitter hatred for the man who had brought thunder to the Powder driving all other feeling from him.

In the background, he heard Mary scream, and Jim Sanders' wild, coyote yell. Lead dimpled the dust at his feet, but Clay kept on running. He was almost to the steps now, and he was holding his fire, remembering one of the last words of caution his father had ever given him. "Jest remember, son, it's the last shot that counts, not the fust!"

Strange, how close his almost forgotten father seemed to be to him, like a ghost walking at his side, unafraid and brave.

There were only two men on the porch, and Clay realized that Sid Maxwell had parted with most of his crew in Virginia City. The Matagordan's greediness had made him do it. There wouldn't be so many ways to split the herd money if he could recapture it.

Shake Hardison was on the porch with Maxwell, and he was dropping his Colt to reach for a sawed-off shotgun against the



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porch rail. The range was close enough now for him to use it effectively. Clay spent his first bullet on the man, and saw Hardison whirl back from the shotgun as though it were hot.

Lead chopped one leg from under him as he gained the porch, and Clay felt himself sprawling forward toward Maxwell, who was no more than ten feet away from him.

Maxwell was crouched, and that silent ironic laughter was twisting his lips again. "You told me to meet you on the Clearwater, Marland," he drawled. "Well, this is it, feller. It's time for you to die—"

Clay fired as he fell, and he was remembering that his dad had always told him to "shoot first and palaver afterwards." He fired again as he struck the floor and rolled, and Maxwell's lead cut a long sliver

from the floor in front of his face. Still rolling, Clay fired a third time desperately, and saw the laughter leave Maxwell's face. Almost unbelievingly, the Matagordan's hand lifted toward his chest.

"Marland—" he choked, and the strength was running from his knees. "Looks—looks like we'll have to settle this in Hell."

Pain shot through his leg, but Clay managed to drag himself to the porch rail, and pull himself erect. He saw Jim Sanders down by the barn, and it looked like he'd taken a prisoner. He heard a noise behind him and turned, gun lifting. Then he dropped it. Mary Holland came running toward him from the living room door, and she was laughing and crying at the same time. Behind her, moving more slowly, was Colonel Atchison, his white mustache bristling furiously, his face redder than raw meat.

Around the corner of the house, rode Clem Holland and Cal. Ahead of them struggled a pair of travel-stained gunhawks, their hands in the air.

"Caught these fellers out back," Clem said calmly. "I figgered this apple would be rotten clean through."

"You're wrong, sir," Colonel Atchison boomed. "The core is sound, by Gad! Clay, boy, I knew ye'd never desert the Slant A. When I heer'd you'd taken that herd to Virginia City, I didn't worry a mite. Not a mite. Knew from the descriptions folks give me it warn't you cuttin' them capers. And then when Sid showed up here, claimin' you'd stole the herd, I knew I was right. But dang him, he was still slick enough to dally a rope around me, and hogtie me to my bed captive upstairs. Only thing he didn't figger was that the thing was on casters, and I could scrooch it over to the winder. Looks right now like ye'd have handled things all right without my help, but how in Tophet is an old cuss like me goin' to know ye had such good company. Charmin' company, I might add." He winked one blue eye at Clay.

The colonel watched Mary move to Clay's side. Clay draped one of his arms about her shoulders. "I hope they got a sky-pilot down at Fort Reno," the Colonel rumbled. "It shore looks like we're going to need one."

Jim Sanders had brought his bloody prisoner from the barn in time to hear the colonel's closing words. He was smiling. "If they ain't," he drawled, "I'll read the ceremony myself. My dad was a preacher, and I know the knot-tying words real well."

Clay smiled down at Mary Holland. "It looks," he said dryly, "like they got things all cut and dried for us."

Mary Holland's own smile was sweet. "I've had them that way for a long time!" she said.

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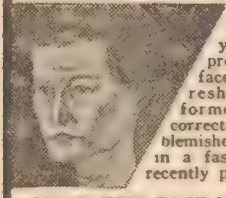

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(Continued from page 33)

impatient glances at the man in his chair. He was anxious to resume the game, once the youth departed.

The batwings slid open once again. A big, heavy-set man stepped into the room. He was chewing on a big, black cigar, and his eyes darted about as though he was looking for someone. The Kid, noticing the expression on Tim's face, glanced back over his shoulder. His eyes swung back to Tim questioningly. He asked softly, "That him?"

Tim was remembering again that if something happened to Bill Treeger, the widow Nelson would be frozen off of her place. Riley Thompson would move in on her as ruthlessly as he had on the others. Yeah, with Treeger out of the way, Thompson would have things his own way. He'd soon own all the desirable range in this section of the valley. Bill was the only one who had the guts to stand up to him.

Tim drew a deep breath. He wet his lips nervously. "Mister," he said, "you was lookin' fer Bill Treeger. Well, there he is."

The Kid pushed back his chair and got to his feet. The man by the door, evidently not finding the person he sought, turned and went back out into the street. Tim watched as the Kid sauntered lazily across the room, slid through the swinging doors after him. He felt cold sweat dampening his forehead, running down the back of his neck.

"Sufferin' Jeremiah!" exclaimed a voice close at hand. Dad stood beside the table, staring down at him out of startled blue eyes. "Yuh do need 'em!"

"What in blazes you talkin' about?"

"Spectacles, that's what!" replied the old man. "Don't reckon I kin figger how a load of buckshot in the legs kin affect a man's eyes, but thet's what must o' happened! Hell, boy, yuh must be half-blind! I heared what yuh was tellin' thet young squirt as I come up to the table. Thet warn't Bill Treeger thet come through the door jest now! It was thet ornery, low-down Riley Thompson! And even if yore eyes is bad, I don't see him—hey, what's thet?"

Dad Wilks fell silent. He listened to the sound of gunfire in the street outside. . . .

(Continued from page 63)

ain't ever even been oiled. The kid was a show-off. He wasn't no killer."

Dane Satterlee was in many ways a fair man. He had adhered rigidly to a code he believed in. "How in blazes was I to know," he roared, "that the kid was locoed?"

A malicious smile played at the corner of Bischoff's mouth, as he no doubt remembered the ribbing he had taken since the bank stick-up. "Mebbe you wasn't to know, Dane. I say, *mebbe* you wasn't. But when this story gets around, you're goin' to do a heap of explainin' to prove it. You're goin' to still be explainin' when your hair's a sight grayer than Nate Melgrim's is now, an' it ain't goin' to sound purty. What would be smart, Dane, is to forget this nester war. Nate Melgrim never did you hurt, an' you might find the explainin' a mite easier."

Ma was on her knees beside Chip's body when Ellie May went to her. "I don't think you're going to have any more trouble with Satterlee, Ma." she said. Then the tears came to her eyes as she looked down at Chip. "Why do you think he did it, Ma? He knew that Satterlee was going to kill him."

Ma reached down sadly and closed his eyes, but she did not cry. I reckon Chip knew what he was doin', Ellie May," she said. I reckon he got what he wanted, what he's been a-watchin' an' a-searchin' for. Chip's up there too now, beyond them peaks or wherever it is Johnny is. Johnny an' him is together agin, Ellie May. Can't you somehow just see them?"

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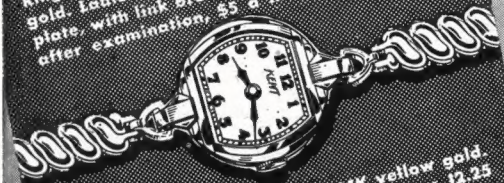

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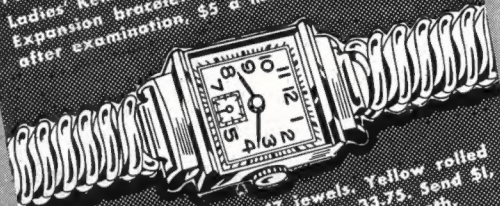

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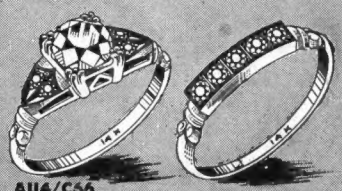

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